

American Culture and the Voice of Poetry

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I

I hope to respond to the large-minded rubric of the Tanner Lectures on Human Values, and at the same time to avoid becoming drunk on the term “Human Values,” or intimidated by it. My goal will be to look at great things through the aperture of my metier. So while “American Culture” is an immense term, by “the voice of poetry” I mean something quite literal and practical: the voice of a person saying a poem. My examples will be specific, drawn from the Favorite Poem Project, a kind of accidental, oblique experiment—or something less scientific, a venture—in American culture.

I’ll begin with some general formulations.

The term “culture” with its old agricultural and biological connotations has taken a new, surprisingly central place in recent thought. Even we unsystematic readers of magazines and newspapers notice that in economics, in American electoral politics, in the geo-political analysis of different peoples and their national systems, culture has become a kind of ulterior cause of causes. It has been proposed that culture determines the power of a nation to achieve economic development, and that cultural differences underlay the recent contest between George Bush and Al Gore. Even the directions and conceptions of science have been seen in cultural terms.

In its former, rather frumpy state, the term “culture” (as in the antiquated phrase “a person of culture”) had no aura of dread (despite Marxist or Freudian analysis of the mere social fear that one might seem “uncultured”). In its contemporary form, however, the notion of culture evokes anxiety of two contradictory, indeed more or less opposite, kinds.

There is the nightmare of undifferentiation, a loss of cultural diversity comparable to the loss of bio-diversity. Hundreds of languages have died in the last century, with their alphabets and epics and delicate structures. In the terrible closing pages of *Tristes Tropiques*, Claude Lévi-Straus indicates how the mere breath, the very glance, of the observer rapidly destroys differences that evolved for centuries, homogenizing and sterilizing the former abundance. This vision of destruction by a dominant culture reminds us of the etymological link between “culture” and “*colon*,” the one who cultivates or scratches the soil, the colonialist.

But the other, obverse dread is of a vicious, tribalized factionalism, the coming apart of civic fabrics through fragmentation, ranging from the paranoid brutality of ethnic cleansing to the division of mass culture into niches. Religious difference, racial difference, linguistic difference, even generational difference can seem compounded and hypertrophied by information-age forces: the fanatical obsession with difference and its exploitation by tyranny have been multiplied and accelerated by modern technology. The swiftness and pervasiveness of contemporary broadcast propaganda parallel the heightened efficiency of contemporary killing squads. In this disturbing vision, the etymological ghost is culture's relation to "cult," a word denoting arcane forms of worship: the sinister difference of strangers.

On one hand, we are afraid of becoming so much like one another that we will lose something vital in our human nature—and on the other hand, we are also afraid of becoming so different, so much divided into alien and murderously competitive fragments, that we cannot survive. In what ways do these opposed, even contradictory cultural anxieties share a single root?

For an American poet, the fear of lost differentiation and the fear of excessive differentiation do indeed embody a single, in fact familiar anxiety: the fear of being cut off from memory. It is memory that tempers the imagined extremes of culture, the polarities of explosion and undifferentiation. Memory resists uniformity because it registers fine gradations; memory resists the factional because it registers the impure, recombining, fluent nature of culture. The mother of the muses is memory, and the traditional Greco-Roman crown of the poet is made of leaves that when picked remain green.

The most profound observers of the United States have seen in our manners, and in the cultural correlatives of our democracy, a version of fragmentation, the dread that we become too unlike one another. Alexis de Tocqueville, in the *locus classicus* for this viewpoint, associates the separation of individuals into fragments or atoms horizontally, from their peers, with the separation of individuals vertically, from their past and future. Tocqueville writes:

Thus not only does democracy make every man forget his ancestors, but it hides his descendants and separates his contemporaries from him; it throws him back forever upon himself alone and threatens in the end to confine him entirely within the solitude of his own heart. (*Democracy in America*, Henry Reeve text rev. by Francis Bowen, ed.)

Phillips Bradley [New York: A. A. Knopf, 1945], vol. 2, chapter 2, p. 99)

This passage recalls the great classical tag, found in *Gulliver's Travels* as well as in *King Lear*, which notes that the human animal is a puny creature: its patchy fur and flimsy hide give inadequate protection; its claws and little teeth are poor weapons. It is a mediocre climber and swimmer, and even its best specimens cannot run as fast as the young or aged of many other species.

This commonplace trope is deployed to emphasize certain redeeming human qualities, such as the capacity for reason or memory. Tocqueville, in comparing democracy with aristocratic culture, directs us toward memory, and a particular aspect of memory: the processes of culture. The creature is not only clever, not only *capax rationis*: it has developed ways to extend memory beyond its lifetime. Its unlikely survival has depended upon its devising means of communication not only horizontally, with its contemporary peers, to co-operate in gaining food or shelter, but also vertically, with its predecessors and successors, so that the experience of past lifetimes can be used.

For this purpose of communal memory and transmission, the animal has devised the binary code of digital media, and printed marks before that, and incised or written marks before that—and before those technologies of marks, the creature made a technology of its own body, with a highly refined system of grunts, emitted through its feeding orifice. Like the griots in Alex Haley's *Roots*, who call up across the centuries information about dynasties, family relations, property rights, the human animal through the amazing grunt-code of speech can retain subtle shades of information: which food is available at what time of year, what customs for mating or burial will best serve the community, information as precise or subtle as “bring me a pound of galvanized ten-penny nails” or “I love you but not that way.” Patterns like rhythm artfully render the grunt-information more memorable, and more memorizable.

I have come to realize that it is this process that I mean by “culture”: the process of shared memory that Tocqueville sees as transformed, even threatened, by the conditions of American democracy. The concept of culture, Stephen Greenblatt has pointed out, “gestures toward what appear to be opposite things: *constraint* and *mobility*” (*Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995])—terms roughly parallel to the uniformities of the colonialist and the divergences of the cultist. The

process of culture, a form of memory, controls us and also enables us. In their extremes those actions of control and liberty manifest the envisioned dystopias of global homogenization on one side and fragmentation on the other. More precisely, culture is a process of both memory and resistance to memory, curatorship and transformation.

Consider poetry, an art that in European languages has roots in aristocratic courts with their flirtations and imperial visions, or in folk sources like the ballad and the hymn. That is, practically speaking, the art of poetry has been preserved in many cultures either by a social class that considers itself the hereditary caretaker or by a cottage life, passed along through the generations along with the jokes, recipes, dances and songs of the grandparents. In other words, poetry in such societies has either snob value or the values of a unifying folk culture: two sources of continuity that the USA, relatively speaking, does not have.

Some Americans used to sentimentalize the Soviet-era poetry readings held in athletic stadiums and attended by thousands. But those events depended upon the exploitation of ancient tastes and attitudes: specifically, they joined the power of totalitarian government with the cachet of poetry in a country where an angry driver will shout at another: "You have no culture!" This is not an American insult. We must strain our imaginations to conceive of countries where the politicians must at least pretend to love the great national poet, and perhaps memorize a line or two.

Relatively speaking, in the United States the high bourgeoisie has not preened itself on curatorship of poetry. Nor do we have a single, unifying folk culture. The Italian-American grandmother, the Cuban-American grandmother, the Yankee grandmother, the African-American grandmother, insofar as they pass on the jokes and recipes and rhymes, will have different ones.

In place of the aristocratic or folk idea, we have, quite characteristically, improvised and patched together a place for the art of poetry, in various ways—journalistic, middle-class-domestic, professionalized, academic, self-conscious—many of them well represented in John Hollander's two-volume anthology of nineteenth-century American verse. The American invention of "Creative Writing" is another example of that improvisation.

I don't mean to deprecate American culture on these grounds, nor to elevate it chauvinistically. We are not Persians or Bengalis. (Though I suppose that some of us are indeed Persian-Americans or Bengali-

Americans.) That in those highly unified cultures most people quote, recite and compose poetry as part of a life is attractive, and in each case reflects a certain culture. Certain forms of memory, relatively speaking, are settled and available. But the eccentricities of Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman explore the soul's dependence on memory, and its resistance to memory, with strangely improvised instruments. Her skewed hymns and his breakaway arias both reflect a culture where imported, inherited and invented elements jangle or coalesce; where the provinces are in no more clear a relation to any capital than the present is to the past; where the wrestling of curatorship with transformation is palpably strenuous. Underlying that contest, and inspiring invention, is the possibility of a vacuum, of failed memory.

That threatening vacuum is in keeping with Tocqueville's most explicit pronouncement about American poetry—a pronouncement that, out of context, can seem comically harsh:

Nothing conceivable is so petty, so insipid, so crowded with paltry interests—in one word, so anti-poetic—as the life of a man in the United States. (*DIA*, p. 74)

But in fact Tocqueville, after observing that the principle of equality “has dried up most of the old springs of poetry,” proceeds to ask “what new ones it may disclose.” Legends of heroes and gods or angels and demons, old traditions and rituals, all viable material for the poet in aristocratic societies, he says, will not serve poetry in America. He has an interesting notion about the first thing poets in the new world would turn to:

When skepticism had depopulated heaven, and the progress of equality had reduced each individual to smaller and better-known proportions, the poets, not yet aware of what they could substitute for the great themes that were departing together with the aristocracy, turned their eyes to inanimate nature. As they lost sight of gods and heroes, they set themselves to describe streams and mountains....Some have thought that this embellished delineation of all the physical and inanimate objects which cover the earth was the kind of poetry peculiar to democratic ages. But I believe this to be an error, and that it belongs only to a period of transition.

I am persuaded that in the end democracy diverts the imagination from all that is external to man and fixes it on man alone. Democratic nations may amuse themselves for a while with considering the productions of nature, but they are excited in reality only by a survey

of themselves. Here, and here alone, the true sources of poetry among such nations are to be found....

Among a democratic people poetry will not be fed with legends or the memorials of old traditions.... All these resources fail him; but Man remains, and the poet needs no more. The destinies of mankind, man himself taken aloof from his country and his age and standing in the presence of Nature and of God, with his passions, his doubts, his rare prosperities and inconceivable wretchednesses, will become the chief, if not the sole, theme of poetry among these nations. (*DIA*, pp. 75–76)

And in a rather ringing final paragraph to his chapter, Tocqueville concludes:

Such are the poems of democracy. The principle of equality does not, then, destroy all the subjects of poetry: it renders them less numerous, but more vast.

From these provocative ideas, rich in implications to develop or refute, suggesting an abundance of examples and suggestions, I would like for now to extract only one main notion of Tocqueville's chapter, as it is germane to the Favorite Poem Project: the relation between the ancient art of poetry and democratic culture. I mean the ideas that take him from the characterization "petty,...insipid...antipoetic" to the ringing conclusion about "the destinies of mankind" and materials "less numerous, but more vast."

Those formulations suggest useful insights into American literature. For instance, how does the poetry of Whitman or Dickinson confirm or refute Tocqueville's expectation that American poetry would reach for profundity not through historical figures, heroes and legends, and not through gods or demons and angels, but by concentration on the individual soul? Can it be that this young Frenchman in effect actually predicted Whitman and Dickinson? And what about Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's conscious effort to create American legends and heroes? Or Herman Melville's? But my subject for the moment is poetry less in relation to American poets than to American readers and reading.

The response to the Favorite Poem Project has surprised me, in its scale and its intensity. With very little publicity, the invitation to name a poem one would be willing to read aloud for an audio and video archive, and to say a few sentences about the poem's personal significance, pro-

duced more than eighteen thousand written responses. (These letters and e-mails themselves are an interesting archive.) In fact, my co-workers on the project and I closed the invitation at that point, before the first CNN television piece about the project, because too many letters would have overwhelmed our selection process, which rested on a few graduate student screeners.

My first names for the undertaking were along the lines of “The Say a Poem Project” and various ideas incorporating the phrase “giving voice.” These titles all seemed cumbersome or corny, and it was my co-editor Maggie Dietz and Sam Miller of the New England Foundation for the Arts, our first sponsor, who came up with “Favorite Poem,” a title that emphasizes the second of the two principles, vocality and autonomy, guiding the project.

As editor, my goals included maintaining a certain level of literary quality, without merely imposing my own tastes; also, representing a range of ages, regions, ethnicities, economic classes, kinds of education. Additionally, Maggie Dietz and I decided that although certain writers and kinds of writing should be represented (for example, African-American poets, Dickinson and Whitman, Shakespeare) the poems should not all be American. Indeed, to reflect American readers and culture—people devoted to Rainer Maria Rilke or Pablo Neruda in translation, for example, and people with native tongues other than English—it would be necessary to include poems written in many different languages. That decision was consistent with the terms of our National Endowment for the Arts grant: to create a portrait of the United States, in the year 2000, through the lens of poetry.

Another question I hoped the project would explore is the place of poetry in relation to a tremendously powerful, often brilliant and certainly elaborate mass culture. In one way or another, every American poet and reader must respond to that amazing constellation of genius and vulgarity, vitality and turpitude, of which the greatest products, perhaps, are jazz and the American feature film.

I find some insight into that question in letters sent to the project, as quoted in the anthology along with the poems, and in the statements of people we recorded reading poems. John Doherty, in his initial correspondence, wrote the sentence “I guess a ditchdigger who reads Shakespeare is still just a ditchdigger.” And indeed, in the video segment, we see him digging a ditch, wearing his hard hat, as part of his work as a construction worker for the Boston Gas Company. After talking briefly

about his work, he reads some well-chosen selections from Whitman's "Song of Myself." "Poetry," he says in his remarks, "was definitely intimidating at first. It just looked like a lot of words that were out of order and out of place, that did not belong together." He adds, "It takes a lot of reading and re-reading to grasp it."

I believe that in many countries social constraints of one kind or another might suppress or temper this candor, requiring more respect or less discovery. This freedom to judge the art of poetry itself as a consumer, intimidated by the art's difficulty but not by its social prestige or authority, feels American to me, for good or ill. It is echoed by a number of the participants, including Seph Rodney, who early in his unforgettable discussion of Sylvia Plath's "Nick and the Candlestick" remarks that he had always thought of poetry as merely "grandiose" and "for want of a better term, a high-falutin' . . . not very *real* way of using language." Like Doherty on Whitman, Rodney on Plath presents his attachment to her work as a kind of conversion experience to poetry itself.

Poetry's place in the world and in a particular life seems more self-evident and authoritative for some of the participants who came here from other places, such as Lyn Aye, the Burmese-American anesthesiologist in San Jose, who reads a poem by Zawgee in Burmese and in English translation, or Jayashree Chatterjee, the New Jersey librarian who reads Rabindranath Tagore in Bengali and in English.

What is striking in all four of these instances is a note of personal conviction in both the delivery of the poem selected and the statements about the poem. The slightly accented Burmese and Indian voices both speak about exile or loss of place, and in what I consider another characteristic American gesture they select poems that simultaneously sharpen and soothe those feelings of immigrant dislocation.

In short, the intimacy and introspection of these readers, in their approach to the poems they read, correspond to Tocqueville's proposition about poetry in a democracy. The subject of each poem as they describe it begins with the condition of a soul: material, to borrow Tocqueville's terms, more "vast" for each reader than it is various or "numerous." (Though an overall variety characterizes the undertaking as a whole.)

Concentration on the individual human soul is audible in the construction worker's remarkable reading of Whitman's closing passage. The poem's familiar, bizarre mixture of grandiloquence and comedy, egotism and generosity, takes on new overtones as the young man in the video, sitting on an earth-mover, reads the first-person lines:

The spotted hawk swoops by and accuses me...he complains of my
gab and my loitering.

I too am not a bit tamed...I too am untranslatable,
I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.

The last scud of day holds back for me,
It flings my likeness after the rest and true as any on the shadowed
wilds.
It coaxes me to the vapor and the dusk.

I depart as air...I shake my white locks at the runaway sun,
I effuse my flesh in eddies and drift it in lacy jags.

Whitman's vision of his death and his endurance are insightfully read by Doherty as an address to the reader, on a quite practical level. "You will hardly know who I am or what I mean," he reads, and "Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged, / Missing me one place search another, / I stop somewhere waiting for you." This advice was written, and in this instance was read, in a particular spirit of direct address, an immediacy that means to redefine poetry itself, and views the personal occasion as transcendent.

The mass medium of video, perhaps paradoxically, thus dramatizes something I consider crucial about the medium of poetry: a poem takes for its medium the reader's breath and hearing. That is, even in silent reading, the reader imagines the sounds of the words and sentences. When I read a poem, aloud or not, I am aware of it as something to say, or that could be said. The vehicle for that awareness is in my bodily senses—the vehicle also for memory, as when I chant the phone number or the grocery list, some evolutionary link between vocal rhythm and recalled information.

The reader is not merely the performer of the poem, but an actual, living medium for the poem. In relation to mass media, this distinction seems to me crucial: if the medium is any one reader's voice, or any one reader's ears, then the art is by its nature, inherently, on an individual and personal scale. In that intimacy and human presence reading a poem resembles a live performance, as distinct from a mass-produced image such as a movie. But insofar as its text is fixed, the poem is distinctly less ephemeral than the live performance. Poetry's dual qualities of human scale and permanence are roughly parallel to the dread of homogenizing

uniformity on one side and the fragmented life of the Cyclopes on the other side. That is why poetry's voice—its literal, actual voice—takes on a heightened poignancy, and a heightened value, in a culture rich in dazzling performative art that is produced, duplicated and marketed on a mass scale. In the setting of mass culture, the voice of poetry, in ways show business cannot, embodies something crucial: an essential respect for individuals.

To put this another way, I have been surprised to find from this project that in a perhaps unique sense one can see a person read a poem. That is, I can watch your face while you listen to music, watch a movie or look at visual art—but I am not witnessing your experience of that work. The same goes for watching a reader deep in a novel. To watch someone saying a poem aloud can be to witness that person's experience of the poem. The readers in the videos, though they know that they are being filmed, make visible the intimate and individual nature of the art. Their "performances" of the poems are not actorly presentations of the poem's emotions and ideas—though those are surely present—but something subtly and crucially different from that: presentations of what it is like to read a particular poem.

Tocqueville's speculations about equality, on one hand, and on the other contemporary mass culture with its emphasis on performance, on lavish spectacle and reproduction, combine to make me hear with special urgency the particular reader's voice: its regional accent, its sense of an individual life, and its respect for the words, as it utters:

You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,
But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,
And filter and fiber your blood.

The poem, which is neither its performance nor its characters on a page, is what takes place as a reader literally or figuratively gives voice to the lines, rendering the cadences and the unique currents and energies of the syntax, apprehending the movement of the meanings.

When the Favorite Poem Project has been described approvingly as "populist" I have felt uncomfortable, because I know that our approach was in essential ways elitist. There is a generation that loves the writing of Robert Service, and some of them wrote to us, and some of their grandchildren wrote to us about Shel Silverstein. Some from the generations between those two wrote to us about Rod McKuen, or

the lyrics of Bob Dylan—all part of the larger archive of letters and e-mails, but not represented in the book or the recordings, by fiat of us editors.

On the other hand, we were guided by respect for the ways nonprofessional readers read and the ways they describe their reading. This element of the project has excited some negative judgment. Pov Chin, a teenager from California who is represented both in the anthology and in the videos, wrote:

My interpretation of this poem written by Langston Hughes may not be the same as his. But a poem is what I choose to make of it and this one is a description of me. It explains how I feel about life.

A reviewer of the book took this statement as his leading example of a defect he found in it. After quoting these sentences, he writes:

This theme—*this is a description of me*—occurs again and again.... Rather than letting poems draw us out of ourselves, making us larger and broader, we are encouraged to make the poems smaller so that we can take them inside us and, in a literal sense, comprehend them.... Pinsky and Dietz may simply have assumed that the only way to sell poetry to Americans is to appeal to their inherent narcissism. (Troy Jollimore, *Boston Book Review* [March 2000])

In its way, this makes a certain sense. (The reviewer, incidentally, quotes de Tocqueville about American pettiness and self-centeredness, but not about the more vast subjects for poetry.) The terms of the Favorite Poem invitation did invite the volunteers to say something about their particular, personal reasons for selecting the poem. Indeed, the explicit criterion we developed for selection was the intensity and interest of what the person had to say about the poem. It could be argued that this editorial inclination vulgarized the project, or at least distorted it toward the personal or introspective, and away from the poem as a means of discovery about the world, or as a highly developed work of art.

But the cliché of American narcissism does not adequately describe what these people actually say. Let me return to the example of Pov Chin, who says of a poem that it is “a description of me.” Her voice and accent in the video are those of a California teenager, and this prefatory statement of hers (a statement I think of diffidence) can sound glib or self-centered. The poem is an extremely short one by Langston Hughes, far from his most impressive work:

Minstrel Man

Because my mouth
 Is wide with laughter
 And my throat
 Is deep with song,
 You do not think
 I suffer after
 I have held my pain
 So long?

Because my mouth
 Is wide with laughter,
 You do not hear
 My inner cry?
 Because my feet
 Are gay with dancing,
 You do not know
 I die?

The little paradigm of this poem, as plain as a folk song, takes on rich overtones and vibrations in relation to the American minstrel tradition of blackface—makeup that was sometimes worn by black, as well as white, performers. The grinning minstrel-show performer, bursting with joy, represents a terrible and complicated process of cultural appropriation and distortion, all sorts of sublimated guilts and envies and myths, comforting and disturbing.

Of all that, the high school student Pov Chin appears to be unaware. When she found the poem and copied it out, she tells us, she had not heard of Langston Hughes. It is not clear if she knew at the time that he was African-American, or what the information signifies to her, particularly since she was born in Laos of Cambodian parents. Yet what she says about the poem is germane, and perhaps increases one's respect for the poem. In the book, she writes:

...I am not free. I am a female Cambodian growing up in America but I am raised in the old-fashioned Cambodian ways. Asian tradition for daughters is very strict. It is so hard for me to see my friends having a sleep-over and the only person missing is me. I walk around school with a big smile on my face but inside I am a caged bird just waiting to be free. Life has never been easy for me especially with my parents' problems. Their problems started during the Khmer Rouge genocide in the early '70s. Two of their sons passed away in front of

their faces, killed by the Khmer Rouge. They still had the courage to get out of Cambodia and find refuge for us in America.

This is not literary criticism, nor does it pretend to be. But the word for it is not “narcissism,” either, and as an explanation of why the writer values “Minstrel Man” by Langston Hughes, it is forceful and appropriate. The association of freedom and cultural restraint with performance and the equation of “big smile” with being caged represent an insightful tribute to Hughes’s poem. To the extent that Pov Chin didn’t know much about the author, it is remarkably intuitive. Even the exclusion from the American high school custom of sleep-overs and the delicate euphemism “passed away” for the murdered children testify to a rich and respectful relation to the poem.

The distinction between the narcissistic and the personal, abundantly clear in this letter quoted in the anthology, is even more clear in the video segment artfully filmed by Emiko Omori. In the opening shot Pov Chin begins speaking in the foreground; in the background, behind her, we see a suburban-looking interior and first a television set playing something with Asian faces and then, as the camera pans upward, the seated figure of a woman. This watchful figure, present throughout the shot, is Pov Chin’s mother, silently following the interview as though she is not about to let this, one of her remaining children, out of her sight. We see a shrine, and some incense being lit and some family photographs: of children posing in front of a very modest house; of an unsmiling elderly woman.

A notable aspect of Pov Chin’s narration comes with her explanation that during the family ordeal and the murder of the little boys she was not yet born; the mother was pregnant. “It was not only us,” she says, “it was my granny, too, and they killed my granny.” The first person plural of “only us” is striking to me: “they rounded us up,” she says at another point. This unself-conscious first person plural, like the watching maternal figure, embodies the powerful familial and social component of the sentences quoted in the anthology and echoes similar questions of the generic and the individual, inside and outside, cultural cage and cultural sustenance, in Hughes’s poem. “I am not free” is related to “they rounded us up”; both sentences acknowledge the great conundrum of each person’s connection to others. Whatever one understands that “we” to represent, it is not narcissism.

I have quoted a somewhat negative response to the project (and the review I’ve quoted from is in fact only partly negative) less to argue with

it or to score points against it than to suggest the range of cultural and literary responses that this undertaking has called up, partly by accident. A scrap about an anthology, or about what is narcissistic, what is personal, is one eddying current in a great flood of ambiguities and agitations. My proposition is that the reviewer's gesture against a leveling uniformity and the Favorite Poem Project's gesture toward a unifying cultural ground, though they seem like opposite actions, both express a defense of shared memory.

A successful, inventive mass culture, together with Tocqueville's "principle of equality" from which the mass culture partly grows, creates a certain need to define, and perhaps construct, the social place of an ancient art. This pressure should not be seen as merely negative: it, too, is enabling as well as controlling. The mass culture itself struggles to adjust memory and change, and like the poets sometimes it succeeds and sometimes it collapses into pretension or banality. In the absence of the settled aristocratic idea, and in the absence of the unifying folk-culture, Americans have been pressed to supply new forms of memory. Responding to this pressure, Whitman became somewhat broken-hearted by his inability to create (and fill) the role of national bard. That sadness was reenforced for me by my own surprise at how journalists responded to President Clinton's gift of *Leaves of Grass* to Monica Lewinsky: they thought of Whitman not as the quintessential American poet, but as the author of a rather hot book.

Nonetheless, the vacuum or pressure that created and frustrated Whitman's ambitions also inspired his poetry. And the unsettled place of poetry has continued to inspire great works as well as blather and despair: the poetry of both William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens, for example, can be seen as growing more or less explicitly out of the question of poetry's place in national manners. "The spirit and space," writes Stevens in his poem "The American Sublime": "The empty spirit / In vacant space. / What wine does one drink? / What bread does one eat?" To take a less sublime example, improvising the figurative bread, the wine, the place, Americans have invented Creative Writing, with all of its still-evolving virtues and defects. The audio recordings, videos and anthology of the Favorite Poem Project are one more gesture of this kind of improvisation, and in some measure give an account of it, as well.

I'm afraid that to make my point I may have exaggerated the uniqueness of the United States. All culture, after all, like any living

person's memory, perpetually adds and rearranges, drops and inflects its material: it is a process of change, not a static entity or a list of works. The more I knew about Iran and India, the more, I am sure, I would have to modify my assumptions about Persian and Bengali poetry, the more flux and ambiguity I would perceive.

Still, American culture as I have experienced it seems so much in process, so brilliantly and brutally in motion, that standard models for it fail to apply. The Mandarin notion of a privileged elite preserving cultural goods on an old-world model is swamped by the demotic genius of characteristic makers like Whitman, Duke Ellington, Buster Keaton. The Arnoldian model of cultural missionaries bringing along the masses wilts not only for the same reason but because modern political history has discredited the notion that intellectual or artistic figures can automatically serve as moral leaders. The Mandarin's complementary opposite, the Philistine model, would accept the marketplace entirely: whatever is consumed, is good. This idea collapses before the omnivorous, strangely vaunting aspiration of actual Americans—with the Favorite Poem Project one current example. Another model, the idea of mass culture as our only real culture, cannot do because culture is a process of memory, and as mass cultural products speed by, the popular culture of each decade is winnowed to be preserved in the care of universities, libraries, foundations. A serious task of criticism is to assist in that winnowing process. In the archives of curatorship, classic jazz and silent comedy and blues await any of the best of our sitcoms or rap performers that deserve remembering. And the model of American culture as a mere confederation of ethnic or regional or religious or gender-based cultures cannot suffice because all of our greatest achievements—a poem by Dickinson or a chorus by Charlie Parker—are as mixed, syncretic and eclectic as our inventions in food or clothing. In that polyglot, heuristic and erratic flux, each of the nonprofessional readers of this poetry project, anchored by the vocal attachment to a poem, offers a still point.

In my second lecture, I will try to trace certain ways that American poets of the past century have brought social materials, and even a kind of social comedy, into the introspective lyric poem: expanding, and perhaps breaking through, the prescient terms of Alexis de Tocqueville. But I hope it will be appropriate, in relation to what I have said, to end with a personal response to a poem. The project asks for "a" favorite, not one single favorite. I will say a little about my own attachment to one of perhaps a hundred poems I might have chosen.

When I arrived at Rutgers from a town on the New Jersey Shore, the first person in my family to attend college, I found something lordly and exhilarating in the assumption that I was entitled to read the greatest works of art. Though I understood William Butler Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" only imperfectly, I recognized something of the spiritual force Yeats attributes to such monuments of magnificence. "Once out of nature," I read, and that phrase meant immeasurably more to me than *after I die*. "Once out of nature I shall never take / My bodily form from any natural thing, / But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make / From hammered gold and gold enameling."

I can echo Pov Chin here, and say that whatever Yeats meant by these lines, they described me. The alien, elaborate texture of his invented Byzantium, the remoteness from me of the historical Byzantium and of Yeats himself, the stylized and perhaps even absurd image of the mechanical bird—all the strangenesses I heard in the poem—seemed to gain force from their very distance. Those golden quanta of artifice were not American, they were not of New Jersey, they were neither Christian nor Jewish. But the act of putting those strange forms into my actual or inner voice seemed to recognize something already in me—perhaps the past, all the history that had been assimilated unconsciously and in a blur, but in a unique and individuating blur.

The voice of the poem was, precisely, a "bodily form." Because that form could embrace my experience with magisterial ferocity, it spoke to anxieties that perhaps prefigured this lecture's notion of cultural anxieties about fragmentation and sameness. Half-comprehended phrases like "the artifice of eternity" suggested that the soul did not have to be lost in an enveloping mass, nor isolated as a provincial—one was not necessarily doomed to be a cipher or a galoot. The imagined city of Byzantium's differences from what might seem my nature called up that nature—a particular soul tied to a particular dying animal—in a way that, say, a work about Jewish lads from New Jersey whose grandfathers were barkeepers, might not.

The voice of artifice, I secretly half-dared to think, had always been there. Now, maybe, it was ready to wake up and guide what I hoped would be a progress of the natural thing I thought I had been as a child and high school pupil, toward the shimmering world of art, encompassing classical learning and television, a world of hammered phrases and dying animals, of gold and enamel and neon, a world that included and

transformed all, where the drowsy emperor of the will might become alert, where memory endlessly discovered semblances and distinctions: the world, in a word, of poetry.

II

I want to say something about social reality in American poetry of the twentieth century. Alexis de Tocqueville formulated American poetry as introspective, concentrated on the aperture of the individual soul; I mean to look at ways the poetry of the past century has turned his formulation inside-out. Tocqueville wrote:

The destinies of mankind, man himself taken aloof from his country and his age and standing in the presence of Nature and of God, with his passions, his doubts, his rare prosperities and inconceivable wretchedness, will become the chief, if not the sole, theme of poetry. (*DIA*, vol. 1, p. 76)

The story of twentieth-century American poetry could be told as a series of brilliant inventions for including material not “aloof” from country or age: not so much departing from Tocqueville’s larger definition as extending and deepening it to include manners and community.

I’ll begin with some general speculations about social reality and the nature of poetry.

Dire abandonment, I have read, often makes institutionalized souls, especially children, croon and rock rhythmically, a heartbroken ritual music, fearsomely minimal. A medical name for this behavior is auto-stimulation. The embarrassing hint of masturbation in that term, the grotesque unease or nervous giggle of that association, perhaps reveals an eerie recognition. Just outside the membrane enclosing that wounded isolation, made visible by contrast, is my ordinary consciousness: engaged yet furtive, communicative yet shamed, teeming with a host of wants and taboos—the word “taboo” embodying the price of our charmed admission to the world of social stimuli. The regular cadence of the outcast creates a rudimentary other, an illusion of response, that we recognize; the covert sexual fantasies of what we call normal life are only one example of a similar principle at work.

On what I'll call a more formal level, the regular, monotonous chant recalls certain vocalizations of normal, humdrum solitude: little repetitious charms of invocation amid the frustration of some misplaced object—*keys keys keys keys keys*; the staccato repetition of a one-syllable obscenity, like a muttered ceremony of rage or desperation; the happier spells of celebration recited at good news or some gratifying experience (*yes yes yes yes yes*); and—perhaps most interesting of all, and closest to the cadenced moans of the devastated—the little half-sung noises made to ease a painful awareness of embarrassment. I confess that remembering a fetid, grade-A *faux pas* can make me half-whisper a syllable like “*dab*” in *prestissimo* monotone to the rhythm of *The Stars and Stripes Forever* or *The Mexican Hat Dance*.

These ephemeral proto-poems share an interesting duality with the auto-stimulation of total distress. The unvarying, solitary rocking or crooning, with its reduction or stylization, perhaps substitutes mimetically for its opposite: a varying, attentive social presence, listening as I lament my lost car keys, curse my mistake or celebrate the letter announcing good news for me.

The instance of embarrassment is more complex: the tuneless tune I murmur brings back the social world where I brought shame on myself, and imitates the all-too-responsive real presence of others, but in a rudimentary, dwindling simulacrum that distracts me from the awfulness of the actual remembered scene. And this little mimesis, like the cadenced grunts of loss, has its parallel in poetry.

Nervous muttering resembles a work of art in that it simultaneously sharpens and dislocates a feeling, calling it up but transforming it, maybe blunting it a little by incorporation. Insofar as rhythm and repetition accomplish this double action, the little repeated, one-word proto-poem differs significantly from anecdote. Anecdote is sociable; perhaps narrative itself is sociable. Life among others in a novel, even a novel entirely in dialogue, is in some essential way told-about. The novel overtly tells us what people say and do, immersing us in social reality with an illusion of presentation. In a play, presentation is actual: communal reality, in theatrical performance, exists both as though it were happening and as actually happening.

In a poem, the social realm is invoked with a special intimacy at the involuntary level of voice itself. Communal life, whether explicitly included or not, is present implicitly, in the cadences and syntax of language: a somatic ghost. In such a theory, the Industrial-Revolution art

form, fiction, reflects the conversation or letters of middle-class people in a town or city—the panicked verbosity of Pamela, the homey enumerations of Crusoe, the word-wound, shopper-like roaming of Leopold Bloom, all create a social scene from the manufactured web of discourse. The older form of theater is more like a ritual: performance creating actual presences. Maybe that is why theater so often involves the cloying yet somehow apt word “magic.” The social world in poetry, according to this paradigm, is neither told about nor presented: it is, precisely, *invoked*: brought into being by the voice. Incantation, rather than ritual.

Real works blur and explode such distinctions, defying tidy generic modes of social reality. So too do new forms: film art and opera, both of them influencing and influenced by literature, can give presence a virtually assaultive vividness, as enveloping and fluid as dreams. Technologies like film and broadcast media dismantle any tidy definition of art forms from without, as artists do from within. We routinely recognize qualities in a novel as “poetic” or in a poem as “novelistic” or “dramatic.”

Nevertheless, the kinds of art retain attributes, with characteristic terrains—and something deep in poetry operates at the borderland of body and mind, sound and word: region of the subtle knot that John Donne says makes a man. George Oppen calls up that transitional territory in the fifth section of his poem “Of Being Numerous,” with bold contrasts and overlaps among physical fact, cultural artifact and mind itself:

The great stone
Above the river

In the pylon of the bridge

‘1875’

Frozen in the moonlight
In the frozen air over the footpath, consciousness

Which has nothing to gain, which awaits nothing,
Which loves itself.

This passage gains in physicality from the abstract—or at least formal—chiasmic arrangement of vowel-sounds and words in the phrases “frozen in the moonlight in the frozen air” and “nothing to gain, which awaits nothing.” Pronouncing such symmetries audibly, or feeling their

virtual sound, quickens our sense of physical breath stirring into social speech: the poetic quality that poets writing about their art have associated with a conversation heard through a door, a drunken song a few streets away, a distant singer in a foreign tongue. The chiasm of “nothing to gain...awaits nothing” is an artifact like the bridge, recognized before it is interpreted.

Even a dramatic monologue, or a narrated dialogue like Robert Frost’s “Home Burial,” makes its voice or voices present to our imagination partly in the half-conscious way I have attributed to poetry: somatically, by invocation, by something linked to the reflex of auto-stimulation or of its diametric twin embarrassment, a mimesis in rhythmical sound of social life. In Frost’s poem, the blank verse becomes more than a vehicle; it is a physical presence: as corporeal as the infant’s corpse at the center of the poem’s marital argument, and as conventional as the social world that surrounds and infiltrates that same argument. The play of the social and the intuitive is part of the couple’s contention, and it is manifest in their voices:

‘God, what a woman! And it’s come to this,
A man can’t speak of his own child that’s dead,’

‘You can’t because you don’t know how to speak.
If you had any feelings, you that dug
With your own hand—how could you?—his little grave;
I saw you from that very window there,
Making the gravel leap and leap in air,
Leap up, like that, like that, and land so lightly
And roll back down the mound beside the hole.
I thought, Who is that man? I didn’t know you.
And I crept down the stairs and up the stairs
To look again, and still your spade kept lifting.
Then you came in. I heard your rumbling voice
Out in the kitchen, and I don’t know why,
But I went near to see with my own eyes.
You could sit there with the stains on your shoes
Of the fresh earth from your own baby’s grave
And talk about your everyday concerns.
You had stood the spade up against the wall
Outside there in the entry, for I saw it.’

‘I shall laugh the worst laugh I ever laughed.
I am cursed. God, if I don’t believe I’m cursed.’

This passage of fewer than two hundred words—barely room for a prose narration to clear its throat—establishes forcefully the two contending people with their agonized grief, and within both of the agonists two elements contending for recognition: physical reality on one side, and sensitive decorum or ceremony on the other. Both elements are in the verse. The extreme compression, the more remarkable because the dialogue is credible as speech, is enabled by a physical component, by the artist's arrangements of vocal noises at the threshold of consciousness. The occasional end-rhyme is the least of it: "I saw you from that very window there, / Making the gravel leap and leap in air, / Leap up, like that, like that, and land so lightly / And roll back down the mound beside the hole." Analysis can trace such steps only clumsily and approximately: it is not only the syncopation of repeated words, and not only the vowel in "down the mound" but the contrasting vowel of "hole" that ends the sentence with a rather thudlike rhyme on "roll."

In a way the most powerful moment in this conversation is a strange, apparent irrelevance, just before the closing. She has said that "one is alone" and "dies more alone," that "Friends make pretense of following to the grave, / But before one is in it, their minds are turned." His speech in response culminates in the bizarre line, "Amy! There's someone coming down the road!"

After what she has just said about the underlying frailty, even hypocrisy, of human attachments—"The world's evil"—his sudden, exclamatory concern about a passing neighbor or stranger is grotesque, pathetic, absurd in a way that I think is precisely like life. Embarrassment—a halting consciousness of other people, the sudden barricade of social awareness, obstructing emotion and threatening to take over the mind—is in a way the most basic, irreducible manifestation of social reality. For Frost's characters it is both an obtrusion on their argument and part of its essence. In this unexpected line, bursting from the character as he is about to be left, embarrassment and abandonment join.

To some extent, poetry cannot exclude the social realm because poetry's very voice evokes the attentive presence of some other, or its lack. And in twentieth-century American poetry's incorporation of explicit social material, the tension of embarrassment and abandonment recurs. Perhaps the most widely admired poem named by participants in the Favorite Poem Project, appealing to readers of very different ages and levels of sophistication, is "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," a poem

that probes social isolation and social terror with tremendous eloquence. Many high school students seem to intuit that the poem was written by a very young man—T. S. Eliot inventing a middle-aged, first-person protagonist as vehicle for the sexual and social diffidence of youth.

Eliot's poem is of course about many other things as well: for example, it is about culture as a burden, as oppressively controlling and discouraging as it is enabling, perhaps more so. Prufrock in this sense is very close to the figure of the exhausted aesthete, the wistful dandy. If he had confidence, he might be a dandy. For the dandy, experience is somewhat tainted or corrupted by culture. (Though Oscar Wilde might reverse that statement.) As embarrassment is akin to abandonment—feeling excessively distinct from the attentive social world—the aesthete's jadedness is a feeling of sameness. In the terms of Wallace Stevens's "The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad":

Mildew of summer and the deepening snow
Are both alike in the routine I know

This is partly the voice of the nineteenth-century or Romantic life of sensation, in a state of exhaustion. It is an exaggerated, comic version of the pre-modern poets—Algernon Charles Swinburne, Ernest Dowson?—who were the immediate predecessors of the Modernist generation. Frost parodies that hyper-sensitive aesthete in himself, writing in "To Earthward,"

I craved strong sweets, but those
Seemed strong when I was young.
The petal of the rose
It was that stung.

The expressively inverted syntax, "The petal of the rose/It was that stung," is like a gently derisive tone of voice.

What is the point of parodying the dandy or aesthete in oneself, for Stevens or Frost? It is, partly, a way of parodying both poetry itself and the American culture that has no ready place for poetry. Like embarrassment, like the warning "There's someone coming down the road!" it acknowledges the presence of others and the tension aroused by that presence. I hear this serious joke on the voice of poetry in William Carlos Williams, too. In "These," a poem partly about pathos and death, he writes the terrible then momentarily comical lines:

the people gone that we loved,
 the beds lying empty, the couches
 damp, the chairs unused—

Hide it away somewhere
 out of the mind, let it get roots

and grow, unrelated to jealous

ears and eyes—for itself.
 In this mine they come to dig—all.
 Is this the counterfoil to sweetest

music? The source of poetry that
 seeing the clock stopped, says,
 The clock has stopped

that ticked yesterday so well?

Of course all clocks, before they stop, tick—presumably “well.” The rhetorical question, repeating the observation, resembles the ancient wisecrack about even a stopped clock being right twice a day. The poem evokes the terror of death and loss, and then for a moment questions elegy and all other attempts to verbalize loss, as tautological or obvious. “Stupidity” has been an element in the poem from the rhetorical snap of its opening sentence:

THESE

are the desolate, dark weeks
 when nature in its barrenness
 equals the stupidity of man.

The audacity of this, like the almost-parodic repetition of “the clock has stopped,” has a virtuoso quality, in its deadpan, downright way almost as dandified as Stevens’s exotic ambushes of vocabulary. There is even a note of the exquisite in the rarefied word “counterfoil,” which sounds like music or fencing but denotes the stub of a check, where the date and amount are recorded.

Like one who recalls “The petal of the rose / It was that stung,” and like the sensibility that finds the white of summer mildew and the

white of snow “alike,” Williams’s voice here momentarily concedes an embarrassing absurdity in its discourse, and in the roots of its discourse. The stopped clock once ticked well, then it stopped—poetry sees this and in effect strikes its brow, speaking its question to marvel at the obvious. It is a moment that places poetry into something a little like a roomful of people, with Williams simultaneously among them, regarding poetry as quizzically as any, but also presenting its power to them—as he does with the two lines that follow the relatively comic question:

The source of poetry that
seeing the clocked has stopped, says
The clock has stopped

that ticked yesterday so well?
and hears the sound of lakewater
splashing—that is now stone.

With characteristic speed, restlessly varying idioms and levels, Williams takes the memorializing gesture from somewhat hapless record-keeping—the counterfoil noting the stopped clock—to a somber image, with a kind of classical dignity.

The aesthete, stung by the petal, seeing the mildew and the snow as alike, is in a way the poet reduced to a social type. In these poems, a touch of the hyperbolically exquisite allows poetry to acknowledge its own nature: by some social standards, an art of preposterous, goofball metonymies and far-fetched resemblances. In a mode that is a mirror-reversal of the dandyish, it sees that the clock has stopped and says, “the clock has stopped,” adding that it ticked quite well yesterday. In each case, a tiny particle of social comedy infuses a brilliant phrase. The self-consciously dandyish and its mock-naive reversal both acknowledge poetry’s exorbitant, nearly embarrassing qualities and at the same time make those qualities irresistible and even—because they have a social meaning—somehow familiar.

Poetry, then, has roots in the moment when a voice makes us alert to the presence of another or others. It has affinities with all the ways a solitary voice, actual or virtual, imitates the presence of others. Yet as a form of art it is deeply embedded in the single human voice, in the solitary state that hears the other and sometimes re-creates that other. Poetry is a vocal imagining, ultimately social but essentially individual and inward.

Insofar as Tocqueville was prescient about American poetry's concentration on the human soul, "aloof" from society and from ages, there is perhaps a special drama in our poetry to this play between social and individual, outward and inward voice.

Elizabeth Bishop delineates that drama explicitly and compactly in the crucial passage of her poem "In the Waiting Room":

Suddenly, from inside,
 came an *ob!* of pain
 —Aunt Consuelo's voice—
 not very loud or long.
 I wasn't at all surprised;
 even then I knew she was
 a foolish, timid woman.
 I might have been embarrassed,
 but wasn't. What took me
 completely by surprise
 was that it was *me*:
 my voice, in my mouth.
 Without thinking at all
 I was my foolish aunt,
 I—we—were falling, falling,
 our eyes glued to the cover
 of the *National Geographic*,
 February, 1918.

The voice comes "from inside"—inside the dentist's office and inside the child. The possible embarrassment ("I might have been...but wasn't") may be prevented by the strangeness of this moment, which could be a primal moment for poetry, or for individual consciousness, or both. As she begins to faint, the child gazes at the undifferentiated landscape of "shadowy gray knees, / trousers and skirts and boots / and different pairs of hands" and asks, "Why should I be my aunt, / or me, or anyone? What similarities... / held us all together / or made us all just one." The bizarre, alien assemblage of knees, boots, hands, as a vision of the social world outside the self, fragmentary and dizzily provisional, may be peculiarly American.

What makes us all one—and what makes us all different—seems deeply involved with a voice: a voice that is both imagined and actual; both inner and social; both mine and someone else's; that separates me and includes me. It will not do to sentimentalize this voice; at the climax of Bishop's poem is the sentence "The War was on." Each of these

dualities involves struggle, perhaps even combat. But the voice of poetry is uniquely situated as audible yet not necessarily performative.

I have proposed in both of these lectures that the voice of poetry is intimate, on an individual scale. It penetrates and in a sense originates where the reader's mind reaches toward something heard or uttered as though vocality were one of the senses. This medium is different from the poet's intonations and personality shining forth at a poetry reading, and different from a skilled actor's gifts. It is inside a reader. It is vocal and emotive and intellectual.

This intimacy and human scale have special meaning within a mass culture extraordinarily rich in performance, with show business providing an industry, an aristocracy, an all-but-universal measure. American mass culture is a mighty achievement, and its works have included poetry and been included in poetry. But American poetry also plays a vital role as a contrast to mass culture, somewhat resistant precisely because the poetic medium is essentially individual.

This contrast explains the frequency with which one is asked a certain question. In its various forms, it is the question that the news media cannot resist asking any poet. Broadcast or print; highbrow, lowbrow or middlebrow; national or local—uppermost in the reportorial mind is always the same inquiry, sometimes presented as the product of original thought, a conceptual innovation. Like many clichés, the question picks up the truth by precisely the wrong end, with the grip that cripples or neuters.

The inevitable Question, however it is presented, amounts to: shouldn't poetry be part of show business? Or even, why does it seem out of step with so much else? And because the query is wrongheaded, one's answers are always a bit feeble. It might be, "Have your poems been set to music?" Well yes, but to paraphrase a great poet, I thought I was doing that when I wrote them. Or, "What do you think of rap music?" Don't know much about it, but my guess is that as with "literary" poetry most of it is ordinary, a little of it is very good and a little is contemptible. I have heard Yusef Komunyakaa express distrust of it insofar as it makes a commodity out of rage. "And poetry slams?" Probably a good thing for poetry, though as part of the entertainment industry poetry will always be cute and small; as an art it is immense and fundamental. "How can I learn to read poems aloud?" By reading poems—for instance, poems by Emily Dickinson and Gerard Manley Hopkins, among others who might not have been hits on the poetry

reading circuit. "Do you write for the page or for the stage?" I hope that I compose with my voice, and that I read with my voice. I do own pens, and word-processing equipment, and I use them.

But the interrogation is hopeless, because it begins with the assumption that poetry's tremendous strength, in the American context, is its weakness. Poetry mediates, on a particular and immensely valuable level, between the inner consciousness of the individual reader and the outer world of other people. To take poetry from that profound terrain to a more familiar platform would be to tame it.

And perhaps American poetry, where society so often appears more as an imagining than as an experience, is untamed in particular ways. It has been proposed that while the United States is a great nation the Americans are not—or not yet?—a great people. We are not defined by blood and we are perhaps not yet defined by the alternative of shared memory. The Constitution, the Civil War, the cultural achievements of Walt Whitman, Willa Cather, Duke Ellington, John Ford—are they, quite, part of a shared memory? Do they supply the place of a mythological origin as dragon's teeth or wolf-babies? In this view, even our racial divisions are only one egregious part of the ongoing project of becoming a people.

In another way of looking at it, perhaps it is the spirit of American culture to resist becoming "a people," or to continue that project indefinitely, always morphing or discarding—not resting with, for example, Longfellow's Paul Revere and Hiawatha. In its way, the unlikely, almost unreadable landscape of Bishop's waiting room, prosaic yet delirious, is more like a national myth, closer to Whitman's barbaric and unanticipated yawp. In the project of inventing a culture, or of an ever-prolonged imagining one, the voice of poetry is essential because of its unique place between silence and speech, between the single soul and the community, between marketplace and dreamlife, between the past and the breath of the living.

Culture, in all its forms of memory, can preserve us from excessive sameness on one side and fanaticism about difference on the other side. Culture also can be oppressive, even nightmarish: genocides, holocausts, the destruction of ancient cultures, massacres, imperialisms, police states and prison states all can be seen as cultural manifestations. Poetry is not the voice of virtue and right thinking—not the rhyme department of any progressive movement; in fact, great poets have espoused repulsive politics. But the turns of verse, between justified and ragged,

the regular and the unique, the spoken and the implied, the private and the social, profoundly embody a quest—perhaps the democratic search, and endless—for life between a barren isolation and an enveloping mass.

I will quote another poem—one I have written about before, in an account of my home town on the Jersey Shore. My excuses for writing about the poem again are aptness to the present subject and the poem's magnificence. Written near the beginning of the twentieth century by Edwin Arlington Robinson, "Eros Turannos" epitomizes for me the tidal forces within lyric poetry that draw it toward the social. The poem's peculiar, rather spectacular form embodies those forces and their "War," as Bishop calls it, with something private and interior.

Robinson's poem begins with the situation of one person: a woman who must choose between a love affair that she well knows will be a calamity or no love affair at all. The extraordinary account of her psychology turns out, partway through the poem, to be spoken by a town:

EROS TURANNOS

She fears him, and will always ask
 What fated her to choose him;
 She meets in his engaging mask
 All reasons to refuse him;
 But what she meets and what she fears
 Are less than are the downward years
 Drawn slowly to the foamless weirs
 Of age, were she to lose him.

Between a blurred sagacity
 That once had power to sound him,
 And Love, that will not let him be
 The Judas that she found him,
 Her pride assuages her almost,
 As if it were alone the cost.
 He sees that he will not be lost,
 And waits and looks around him.

A sense of ocean and old tress
 Envelops and allures him;
 Tradition, touching all he sees,
 Beguiles and reassures him;
 And all her doubts of what he says
 Are dimmed with what she knows of days—

Till even prejudice delays,
 And fades, and she secures him.

The falling leaf inaugurates
 The reign of her confusion;
 The pounding wave reverberates
 The dirge of her illusion;
 And home, where passion lived and died,
 Becomes a place where she can hide,
 While all the town and harbor side
 Vibrate with her seclusion.

We tell you, tapping on our brows,
 The story as it should be,
 As if the story of a house
 Were told, or ever could be;
 We'll have no kindly veil between
 Her visions and those we have seen,
 As if we guessed what hers have been,
 Or what they are or would be.

Meanwhile we do no harm; for they
 That with a god have striven,
 Not hearing much of what we say,
 Take what the god has given;
 Though like waves breaking it may be,
 Or like a changed familiar tree,
 Or like a stairway to the sea
 Where down the blind are driven.

The poem's astoundingly deployed rhymes make it a kind of hyperballad: a ballad to the ballad power, as though the woman's isolation and shame call up some longing for a folk-tradition that her country does not have. The first-person plural impersonates the communal, but also heightens the poem's loneliness and lack. I take that sense of lack partly from what I know of Robinson's career. For the long first part of it, he was indigent, lonely, spurned by magazine editors, embittered with his provincial town in Maine and with the New York where he also found the going hard.

But on the other hand, the town does notice the woman's fate, and notices it with awe. On this subject, let me quote the letter about this poem printed in *Americans' Favorite Poems*—the only letter in the anthology that we print anonymously:

I discovered the poem many years ago as a newly married girl living in a small town, which in fact possesses a harborside. My husband had an intractable (it seemed then) drug and alcohol problem and was away a lot for his job. I didn't have a job at the time, knew no one, and spent many days in solitude riding my bike, reading, and reflecting on what my life had become since my decision to marry. I did not then comprehend what the line "for they that with a god have striven" meant. I just recognized completely the state of wishing to be united with a man because of what I knew or thought I knew about the onward years. I lived then and now in an ancient house left me by my father, whose father left it to him, whose father left it to him. It is one mile from the ocean, surrounded by old trees. These facts made up no small part of my husband's decision to marry me. I copied that poem into the journal I kept then and it sits before me on the table as I write. I have always felt the woman was as I was. The knowledge that I've gained about "the god" has lent a retrospective dignity to events experienced as utter failure. The discovery of the poem, with its eerily large number of coincidences with my own situation, was like a gift, or maybe a clue in a giant game of charades, from "the god" himself, who saw he had perhaps misjudged his opponent.

This personal account of the poem is as remarkable as the coincidences it notes. Its viewpoint is perhaps more psychological and social than literary. The writer, for all her power and eloquence, does not choose to consider the ways that the poem's story may be Robinson's story, a transformed account of his own frustration, loneliness, dignity and rage. But this insightful, anonymous letter also suggests something like the classical relation of tragic hero and community, or touches on that idea with the words "a retrospective dignity." In the poem, the community gains a certain stature from its awareness that in it is one who has wrestled with a god; the individual gains dignity from the witnessing of that struggle. The man, who "waits and looks around him," is in ways less important than the god or the town. The poem is less about two people than it is about one person, love as a ruling force, and a social setting.

The form of poetry in the poem, the chiming and symmetrically swirling rhymes, creates the voice of a great solitude, a desolation that communicates itself to the very landscape. "A sense of ocean and old trees" is vague partly as a mocking evocation of the man who looks around him, lightly comic in ways like those I have noted; but the phrase also has a specificity that relates it to Robinson's concluding im-

age, the “stairway to the sea/ where down the blind are driven.” The nightmare ritual or flight suggested by that image implies a social world more ancient or more fantastically barbarian than can be known. The voice of the poem, in our heads and in our breath, brings that world and the solitude of the protagonist together, with terror and majesty.

“Eros Turannos” was published in the same issue of *Poetry* magazine as Carl Sandburg’s group of *Chicago Poems*, including “Chicago”—the well-known anthology piece (it is in the Favorite Poem anthology), the apostrophe that begins “Hog Butcher for the World” and ends “Freight Handler to the Nation.” “Chicago” is not a bad piece of writing, though by “anthology piece” I have indicated its limits. In no way does it begin to equal “Eros Turannos” in emotion, in formal penetration or invention. But Sandburg’s group was made the leading item in that issue of *Poetry* and that year received the magazine’s Levinson Prize, which Yvor Winters in his book on Robinson says was “the most considerable prize offered for poetry in the United States at that time” (*Edwin Arlington Robinson*, p. 11).

This is very far from the most impressive anecdote about literary awards and recognitions: it’s a familiar tale that Marcel Proust, Henrik Ibsen and James Joyce all failed to win the Nobel Prize in Literature. The lists of poet laureates include many ciphers. With the arrogance of the living, we may deceive ourselves that nowadays we know better. What’s germane here is the way these two poems approach their subjects, and their implied subject of how poetry will situate itself in relation to American life.

It may be that the judges found Sandburg’s epithets and participles vital: “Laughing the stormy, husky, brawling laughter of Youth, half-naked, sweating, proud to be Hog Butcher...” Indeed, they may have found his poem engaging and engaged precisely in relation to my subject in these lectures: poetry’s voice in American culture. Where “Eros Turannos” might have seemed laudable but modest in scope, Sandburg’s dithyrambic embrace of Chicago as “laughing with white teeth” may have seemed not only original but *avant-garde*. (But *avant-garde* may be a contradiction in terms in our culture, where the model of mass media makes being part of some *garde* too available, and perhaps too prized, when the crucial issue is, precisely, distinction.)

Comparison of the two poems helps define a place for American poetry, its profound role of both engaging and resisting the rather Sandburg-esque giant of a society that is at once dazzling and banal,

provincial and global, menacing and hopeful. Poetry's voice participates in that society and its culture, but by its nature also resists them: by nature singular where they are plural, memory-driven where they are heedless, personal where they are impersonal—luxuriously slow where they are rushed, and thrillingly swift where they are plodding.

I speak as an enthusiast of modern life: I enjoy the possibilities of jet travel, the DVD and the VCR, am devoted to my computer and my cell phone, appreciate the marvels of contemporary plumbing, medicine, dentistry. Like Frank Bidart in his recent poem "For the Twentieth Century," I am grateful for the technologies that make Callas, Laurel & Hardy, Sziget available at a touch of the PLAY button, turning their art into "pattern, form/whose infinite//repeatability within matter/defies matter." But the voice that appreciates the artists and the "thousand/technologies of ecstasy" that preserve them is also idiosyncratic, not duplicable, and resistantly inward as well as outward.

What Robinson resisted in 1911 was a provincial vacuum, the nightmare of us small-town watchers who can gossip and tap our brows but cannot make tragedies or ballads. A village stinginess haunts his work and this poem in particular, recalling Tocqueville's description of American life: "Nothing conceivable is so petty, so insipid, so crowded with paltry interests." There is something heroic in Robinson's simultaneous resistant loathing and meticulous love for the provincial settings and figures he imagined, the lonely grandeur of his hypertrophied ballad stanzas and saturated ironies. Sandburg has considerable merits, but by comparison his poem's rebellions are trivial, and its celebrations coarse.

Robinson, like the hero of his poem, wrestled with something larger than himself, and his wrestling deserves a grave and delighted communal awe. His command of specificity and abstraction and his managing of idiom and lines resist in an anticipatory way any invitation to make American poetry something that goes down easily: a part of show business, or a branch of literary theory, or any other diminished thing. I believe that there are great poems being written now, by living American poets. Almost by definition, such poems are grounded partly in resistance. Almost by definition, we may not be giving them laurels. "Eros Turannos" is arresting and spectacular, in the chamber of spirit and ear that I have suggested is the place of poetry. Its distinction answers a cultural need as a more eager rhetoric of community cannot. In certain ways "Eros Turannos" is in itself and in its place in the world a little

aloof, not automatically or easily visible. It is great as a work, negligible as a commodity. That is the way of the world. Fortunately, art too has its way: not tamed by expectation, untranslatable by journalism or pedantry, outlandish, even barbaric, sounding its yawps somewhere over our worldly roofs, or beyond them.