

“U SHALL NOT STOP LISTENIN TO DIS POEM”:
 CONTEMPORARY POETRY IN AND OUT
 OF THE HIGH SCHOOL CLASSROOM

by *Michael Milburn*

. . . an instance of poetry flourishing itself
 rather than proving itself . . . (Seamus Heaney, Nobel Lecture)

Reading a magazine article recently, I came across a quotation from T. S. Eliot’s “Gerontion,” a poem that I had first read in high school and returned to many times since:

History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors
 And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions,
 Guides us by vanities....

Think

Neither fear nor courage saves us.
 Unnatural vices
 Are fathered by our heroism. Virtues
 Are forced upon us by our impudent crimes.

These lines, encountered in the midst of ordinary prose, instantly increased my attention. After finishing the quotation, I set aside the magazine, retrieved my copy of Eliot’s *Selected Poems*, and reread “Gerontion” in its entirety before moving on to “The Waste Land” and my other favorites.

My attraction to “Gerontion” represents an ideal response to poetry, one that few contemporary poems evoke in me. I spend much of my time reading new poetry, sifting through books and journals in search of poems to inspire me or my high school students. Prompted by the teenagers’ tastes, I keep up with the spoken word poetry scene through videos and web sites, while striving to balance this contemporary material with more traditional writing. Each summer, I comb the annual *Best American Poetry* anthology for worthwhile verse that I may have overlooked, and borrow from the public library a dozen or so new books in order to keep abreast of my contemporaries’ work. But even in the midst of such plenitude I rarely come across lines with the force of Eliot’s.

In a controversial 1988 essay entitled “Who Killed Poetry?” Joseph Epstein lamented the decline in the genre since the days of the Modernists—Eliot, Frost, Stevens, Pound, Williams. When Epstein’s essay appeared, I was working at Harvard in a small library devoted to contemporary poetry. Each week, the library cataloguer would drop off a shipment of new books, which I would read before shelving them. I also helped to host a weekly poetry reading after which my boss and I would escort the visiting poet and a few guests to dinner at a Harvard Square restaurant. Epstein’s essay dominated the conversation at these gatherings, eliciting defensive comments. Though I nodded in agreement with the

latter, my copious exposure to poetry had begun to nudge me toward Epstein's point of view. I too found myself going back, not as far as Eliot and company, but beyond most of the current product, to find anything that thrilled me.

Since leaving the library and beginning a teaching career, I have continued to promote poetry, but feel no less dissatisfied. I don't mean to dismiss all contemporary verse; in fact, my personal list of great poems contains, along with traditional masterpieces, a few recent examples that I would never have discovered without my annual trawl through books and journals. Even lesser contemporary poems often please me, though after finishing them I move on as from a satisfying but ephemeral novel that I would be content never to read again. Unlike "Gerontion," "Directive," "The Second Coming," or lyrics by Akhmatova or Neruda, they don't haunt me or draw me back until I memorize them or fold them into my wallet. Until recently, I assumed that all readers, even those who extol the vitality of contemporary poetry, made this distinction between the great and the good.

Lately, however, poetry's audience seems to have shifted away from qualitative standards. Nowadays the genre is often celebrated for its abundance, with adjectives such as "prolific" and "thriving" bestowed as critical compliments. Even the once prestigious term "poetry" has come to describe not just extraordinary poems, but ordinary ones spawned by the genre's ever-multiplying forums. What troubles me about this development is that it fosters mediocrity, which doesn't suit poetry at all. Competent poems accomplish nothing that similar works in other forms don't accomplish more effectively; one can find pleasing verbal music and rhythm in a Top 40 song, or hear a moving story in a memoir, novel, or movie. In my view, poetry's only worthwhile function, and the reason that we should hold every new poem to the standards of "Gerontion" or whatever great poem one chooses to name, is to affect readers profoundly and permanently.

One finds evidence of the new expansiveness in the edition of *Best American Poetry* (2001) edited by Robert Hass. In his introduction, Hass recalls how he balked at the series' seventy-five poem quota, and protested that "there were whole centuries in which there weren't seventy-five good poems." By the project's end, however, he was pressing for "a format that included eighty-five poems, or eighty, or, my last pitch, seventy-eight, just three more, why not? what's the difference?" Apparently, Hass relaxed his definition of good and the field of candidates expanded. But what if he had stuck to his original limit, declining to identify seventy-five "bests" from a single year? Would readers have been motivated to toughen up their own criteria for excellence, or to revisit some earlier century's classics and acknowledge their superiority? Perhaps the greatest beneficiaries of such rigor would have been poets themselves, who might have felt more pressure to produce, or at least publish, exceptional work.

If prominent judges of poetry enforced strict quotas and chose *not* to honor as much writing as possible, they would curb the amount of available and acclaimed verse. Projects such as *Best American Poetry* would have to be scrapped along with their mission of attracting new readers, a goal that has justified every exercise in poetry proliferation from Bill Moyers' PBS documentaries, to poetry slams, to subway verse, to the populist programs initiated by recent Poet Laureates. But would such an outcome hurt the art? While these ventures have brought poetry to new audiences, their rationale seems to be "the more the better" rather than "the better the better." Great poetry has always been written infrequently, so boosting its quantity is unlikely to improve it. The opposite effect seems probable, that more bad poetry will be written and made public. This will disappoint good readers or impress those

of such low standards that poetry will lose its status as what Paul Bowles called “the most powerful construction that can be built by words.” A bit of marginalization might even be good for poetry, which, like all art forms, should choose one more than one chooses it.

I feel like a curmudgeon criticizing poetry’s prosperity, since ordinary poems hurt no one and appear to please many. One could argue that the plentiful opportunities available to poets increase the chance that they will produce brilliant work and that readers will discover it. Or that the scarcity of poetry created by Hass’s initial quota would prevent readers from educating their tastes and learning to determine great and inferior for themselves. But we have grown lazy about making this distinction; the surfeit of poetry produced today and our benevolent view it—few critics write negative reviews, and many overpraise unremarkable work—have led us to reward mere competence. Poets publish and critics praise ever more second-rate poems, causing standards to deteriorate until readers risk forgetting or, worse, never learning how much better great poems are than good ones.

This last prospect is of particular concern to me as a teacher who strives to excite teenagers about poetry while instilling in them rigorous standards of quality. In pursuit of the first goal, I succumb to my own version of Hass’s inclusiveness, offering the kinds of accessible, colloquial poems that satisfy most fifteen-year-olds. Invariably, these elicit such passion and debate in class that I hesitate to point out their shortcomings, and defer bringing in more demanding works that might alienate the students. After all, what more can we ask of art than that it please and provoke? Contemporary readers face a similar quandary: do they settle for writing that entertains, or insist upon poetry’s capacity to change their lives, something achieved by only a handful of poems—seventy-five or fewer per century sounds right to me.

Glancing through some recent volumes of *Best American Poetry*, I discovered that many of the guest editors shared Hass’s “impulse to include poems that were accessible and immediately appealing with poems that expected a good deal of readers.” Many of the selections also satisfied my students’ taste for poetry that echoes the rhythms of contemporary speech and experience:

“I just love it,” Mom says.

“You love it?” I say.

“Yes, I love it!”

Then she calls to Dad who’s enjoying himself on the 18-hole putting green located just 3 feet outside the kitchen sliding glass door, “Don’t we love it, hon?” (from “Empress of Sighs,” by Beth Lisick. *Best American Poetry 1997*, edited by James Tate)

. . . While he strategies in rush-hour traffic I mention to my husband that the night before, I asked my eighty-five-year-old mother if she and father enjoyed “good sex.”

Directly, he commands
(without shifting his focus from driving)
“I don’t want to know.”



“Good”

(I set him up).

“I don’t want to tell you anyway.” (from “Kolohe or Communication,” by Carolyn Lei-Lanilau. *Best American Poetry 1996*, edited by Adrienne Rich)

don’t be so mean papa
cuz the music don’t come easily now
don’t stomp the young dude
straining over his birthright.
he don’t know what he doing yet
his mornings are still comin
one at a time.... (from “Last recording session/for papa joe,” by Sonia Sanchez.
Best American Poetry 1999, edited by Robert Bly)

Each of these poems adds stylistic diversity to the anthology in which it appears; in Robert Bly’s edition, for example, readers impatient with such established styles as John Hollander’s formalism, Sharon Olds’s explicit first person lyrics, or Charles Simic’s quasi-Surrealism might find Sonia Sanchez’s jazzy rhythms just the thing to spark their interest in the genre. By balancing conversational diction with expressive line-breaks, Sanchez’s poem bridges slam poetry and more formal written verse, rewarding admirers of both styles. Bly offers a vision of contemporary poetry as inclusive, and reflects the belief of the series’ general editor, David Lehman, “that excellence in poetry is not incompatible with the pursuit of a general audience.”

In order to achieve this compatibility consistently, however, one must compromise. In their eagerness to increase poetry’s audience, supporters too often overemphasize qualities that make poems easy to read or hear. The highest compliment that a poet can receive today from non-specialists—and one frequently conferred upon the best-selling poet Billy Collins—is that his or her verse is immediately understandable. Does that mean that all prospective readers share the fear voiced by many of my students that poetry will be obscure? This would explain why so many people gush over Collins’s witty poems about pets or snow days, flock to readings by poets whose poems are barely distinguishable from their prefatory anecdotes, or cheer slam poets who seem to be shouting raw feelings into the microphone.

Many slam poets *are* thinking out loud, reciting poems that they have composed with minimal revision. In the semi-documentary movie *Slam*, the main character jots his lines down moments before he performs them. The popularity of such instant verse, sometimes cited as evidence of the genre’s robust health, has helped to foster the misconception that poetry suits everyone because it’s as easy to write as to read—not just deceptively simple like an Elizabeth Bishop or Robert Frost poem where all signs of labor have been revised out, but fresh, rough, spontaneous, unliterary. When Bill Moyers documented the contemporary poetry scene for PBS, he showed people of all ages emoting in verse or delighting in the emotings of others.

Public readings—not just slams but more traditional recitals as well—can also undermine the genre even as they increase its exposure. Anyone who has attended thronged readings by Philip Levine or Louise Gluck, with the former’s leavening of wisecracks and the latter’s theatrical reading style, or watched David Mura amuse his listeners with an



exaggerated Chinese accent on the Moyers program, knows that poetry owes some of its popularity to extra-literary effects. As readings have proliferated, so too have poems that seem to have been composed with a watching and listening audience in mind. Several years ago, a friend told me that her daughter had begun to love poetry after hearing Billy Collins read at her high school graduation. Collins's readings, which combine entertaining poetry with a touch of stand-up comedy, are irresistible. But I wonder how long that young audience would have sat still if the speaker had been Wallace Stevens droning out his enigmatic 1950 masterpiece, "The Auroras of Autumn."

In his essay, "Death to the Death of Poetry," Donald Hall reproaches readers like me who criticize the poetry of their own time while praising the past. "Poetry was always in good shape twenty or thirty years ago," Hall writes sarcastically, "*now* it has always gone to hell" [italics mine]. But I haven't always thought that the poetry of the moment was terrible. How could I not have recognized its richness in 1975, my freshman year of college, when Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell, James Merrill, James Wright, W.S. Merwin, Adrienne Rich, Richard Hugo, and Robert Creeley all visited my campus to give readings? According to Hall, however, even this view makes me part of a dubious trend: "People who at the age of fifty deplore the death of poetry are the same people who in their twenties were taught to exalt it. The middle-aged poetry detractor is the student who hyperventilated at poetry readings thirty years earlier." Maybe I do underrate today's poets, but maybe there's simply less poetry worth hyperventilating about now than there was in 1975.

My students would disagree. While the more precocious ones thank me for steering them toward Lowell's *Life Studies*, Bishop's *Geography III*, or Rich's *Diving into the Wreck*, most prefer Billy Collins's contemporary *Poetry 180* anthologies compiled for high school students, or the collections of slam poetry that I keep in my classroom. Once a week I pass out these volumes along with post-it notes for students to bookmark poems that they like. For the rest of the hour the only sounds are of pages turning and post-its being applied. The period concludes with students reading aloud their marked poems. Afterwards, I make copies of one or two to bring to a subsequent class for discussion.

As a prelude to talking about these poems, I ask the students to rate each on a scale of 1 to 10: a "1" indicates that a poem bored them or that they finished reading only because required to; a "5" poem was enjoyable, but destined to be forgotten by lunchtime; a poem earning a "10" will wind up on a bedroom bulletin board or committed to a journal or memory, will, in my definition, change a student's life in some way. Such was the case with "First Writing Since," a poem by the Palestinian poet Suheir Hammad inspired by the tragedy of September 11, 2001. I discovered the poem on the HBO television series "Def Poetry," which features poets, actors, rappers, and others performing their works before a live audience. Hammad's dramatic recital, coupled with her poem's timeliness and plaintive, conversational language, made me confident that most students would give it a high rating.

i have not cried at all while writing this. i cried when i saw those
buildings collapse on themselves like a broken heart. i have never
owned pain that needs to spread like that, and i cry daily that my brothers return
to our mother safe and whole.



there is no poetry in this. there are causes and effects. there are symbols and ideologies. mad conspiracy here, and information we will never know. there is death here, and there are promises of more.

there is life here. anyone reading this is breathing, maybe hurting, but breathing for sure. and if there is any light to come, it will shine from the eyes of those who look for peace and justice after the rubble and rhetoric are cleared and the phoenix has risen.

As I'd expected, my students loved the poem, though I listened to their praise with ambivalence. It always exhilarates me when students appreciate what I set before them, and I too felt passionately about Hammad's subject matter, but I did not consider "First Writing Since" first-rate poetry. Like most poems that take shortcuts into their readers' affections, Hammad's struck me as obvious and melodramatic. Our class heard it only three months after the terrorist attacks, and I doubted that this was enough time for the poet to have reflected upon, much less conceived and polished a poem about, an event as momentous as 9/11. Yet here was the striking young Palestinian clutching a sheet of paper as if she had just typed the poem out in a rush of passion, deploring bias against Arabs in the context of collapsing skyscrapers. In my view, all of the ingredients of a heartbreaking, moving piece of writing were there, but not necessarily poetry.

That said, the Def Poetry poems—declamatory, idiomatic, and almost always composed for performance—are consistently compelling, even if they do frequently lapse into preachiness or cliché. In his dramatization of a poem about teaching in a school for the deaf, the poet Rives incorporates sign language and respectful imitations of the deaf students speaking their poems out loud. The heavyset but glamorous poet Georgia Me recites her poem "Full Figure Potential: A Fat Girl's Blues," which culminates in a trite, but—to the girls in my class—reassuring moral about inner beauty:

Love who you are. Be the best that you can be.
Your spirit will soar, the whole world will see
your strength, your beauty, and your heart.
The ignorance of others won't pierce like a dart.
Let those who worship aesthetics do a pathetic life,
no substance, no feeling, self-inflicted strife.
If they can't see the beauty of my soul, I know
I'm beautiful in the eyes that God beholds.

The Jamaican poet Mutabaruka, dressed in a robe and turban, reads his long "Dis Poem." At just the moment when the students begin to grow restless, he pulls them back to attention with the lines

dis poem shall be called boring stupid senseless
dis poem is watchin u tryin to make sense from dis poem
dis poem is messin up your brains
makin u want to stop listenin to dis poem



but u shall not stop listenin to dis poem
 u need to know what will be said next in dis poem
 dis poem shall disappoint u
 because
 dis poem is to be continued in your mind in your mind
 in your mind your mind

On days when I show these videos, students entering the room notice the TV and eagerly ask if we're going to watch "that poetry show." As they settle into their seats, I list categories for evaluation on the board: personal appearance (dress, hairstyle, race, gender); performance (gestures or vocal effects, whether the poet acts out or simply recites the poem, and has memorized it or reads it off the page); and words. For this last category, I ask them to assess the poem as if it existed in print alone, with no visual or dramatic flair. By pressing them to examine the factors, particularly extra-literary ones, that influence their evaluations, I hope to sharpen their sense of what exactly poetry is. After watching the video, they write down their overall 1-10 rating and then explain how each category affected it. They usually agree that this type of writing is more effective on the screen than on the page, though if asked whether it still qualifies as poetry, most reply, "Of course."

While I have yet to find any Def Poetry poems equal to the best examples of the genre, it's not unreasonable to see discursive, polemical poets such as Hammad, Rives, Georgia Me, and Mutabaruka as descendants of Allen Ginsberg or even Walt Whitman. In "Lone Soldier," for example, the poet Black Ice uses conversational language to project a forthright, independent persona. He writes about the challenge of single fatherhood and his resolve not to neglect his daughter the way his own father neglected him. When he mentions striking his child, he neither qualifies nor justifies the act, but presents it in such a way as to expose himself as a realistic, fallible human being.

. . . she won't see why we have to live
 in a different place or how come
 her and her little brother
 don't see each other's faces
 on a consistent basis, and it hurts
 when I have to lay down the hand of discipline,
 knowing that I just get to spend
 a short segment of time with her,
 so imagine how it feels when I got
 to hit her, and don't get it twisted,
 sometimes I fuck up and don't get her
 because my ego won't let her mother
 call me a babysitter. Before my baby girl
 I'm gonna swallow my pride and show through.
 See, for my kids there ain't nothing I won't go through.

"Lone Soldier" has inspired some of my most successful classes. The majority of students award it a rating of 10 and continue their discussion, particularly about the poet's



admission of child abuse, after the class bell. My own rating would fall closer to the middle of the scale. Black Ice exhibits skill in expressing his frustration over his family situation, and in reporting his aggression without entirely losing his listener's sympathy. In my view, however, his poem is neither subtle nor musical enough to reward repeated readings, especially compared to another poem that touches on child abuse, Theodore Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz." My students appreciate the Roethke poem, but less passionately than they respond to "Lone Soldier."

The hand that held my wrist
Was battered on one knuckle;
At every step you missed
My right ear scraped a buckle.

You beat time on my head
With a palm caked hard by dirt,
Then waltzed me off to bed
Still clinging to your shirt. (from "My Papa's Waltz")

My reservations about "Lone Soldier" won't keep me from teaching it again next year, nor will my preference for "My Papa's Waltz" make me insist on its superiority. At this point in my students' educations, I find it more important to satisfy their craving for the dramatic and controversial than to convince them to admire poems that I or other adults would rate highly.

I don't hide my ambivalence about the Def Poetry poems; on the contrary, I often use it as a spur to class discussion. When I do so, the students nod with understanding. In the case of "First Writing Since," for example, they agreed that Suheir Hammad's personality, voice, and attractiveness enhanced her poem in a way that had nothing to do with literature, a point confirmed when one of the boys in the class recited several lines aloud without inflection or expression, rendering them instantly dull. The students also conceded that the poem owed some of its appeal to its immediacy, and that its effect would diminish over the years, though they could envision a more enduring poem being written on this subject. As an example of timeless topical writing they cited Gil Scott-Heron's seminal 1970 poem "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised," which they found relevant despite needing glosses for its many dated references:

The revolution will not be televised.
The revolution will not be brought to you by Xerox
In 4 parts without commercial interruptions.
The revolution will not show you pictures of Nixon
blowing a bugle and leading a charge by John
Mitchell, General Abrams and Spiro Agnew to eat
hog maws confiscated from a Harlem sanctuary.
The revolution will not be televised.

For all their readiness to admit the drawbacks of "First Writing Since," the students

stood by their high ratings of the poem. I couldn't decide whether to feel relieved or depressed by this. On one hand, their approval revealed their comfort with poetry as an art whose promise of entertainment, with a touch of intellectual stimulation, precluded all else—they felt no need to insist upon profundity or perfection. Yet their willingness to praise middling verse resembles that of contemporary reviewers whose benevolence fosters ever more bad poems and lazy poets. I didn't want to stifle the kids' enthusiasm by disputing their opinions, but I felt guilty about condoning lax standards. What if one of my students grows up to be the kind of cheerleading critic or undisciplined poet that I abhor? I resolved to find a poem that would prompt them to rethink their ratings while preserving their positive view of the genre.

One candidate that I brought to class, "My Shadow" by the Nobel Prize winning Polish poet Wislawa Szymborska, challenged the students' ratings more than anything we had studied so far. Although the poem, with its plain language and linear narrative, could not be called obscure, it also could not be fathomed immediately, as its pronouns and metaphors left much up to the reader. It was the kind of poem, and ours the kind of inconclusive discussion, that might reinforce stereotypes of poetry as a puzzle to be solved by an English teacher prodding students through a maze of symbols. Unlike "Gerontion," however, which I do not fully comprehend even after years of studying it and its critical offspring, "My Shadow" provided enough explicit information in its first three stanzas to sustain my students' interests.

My shadow is a fool whose feelings
are often hurt by his routine
of rising up behind his queen
to bump his silly head on ceilings.

His is a world of two dimensions,
that's true, but flat jokes still can smart;
he longs to flaunt my court's conventions
and drop a role he knows by heart.

The queen leans out above the sill,
the jester tumbles out for real:
thus they divide their actions; still,
it's not a fifty-fifty deal.

I began the discussion by confessing my perplexity as to the identity of the poem's "king" and "queen," and letting the students assume the roles of interpreters. Freed of the pressure to provide a "correct" reading, they speculated happily. Eventually, a few grew impatient with the circuitous discussion, and I sensed that these types of readers would always prefer a poem such as "First Writing Since" that explained itself promptly and did not make them feel slow or stupid. Several other students warmed to the debate, however; they were impressed by the way Szymborska's lines promoted rather than precluded reflection, and excited to apply their own backgrounds and concerns to arrive at a personalized understanding.

My jester took on nothing less
than royal gestures' shamelessness,
the things that I'm too weak to bear—
the cloak, the crown, the scepter, and the rest.

I'll stay serene, won't feel a thing,
yes, I will turn my head away
after I say good-bye, my king,
at railway station N., some day.

My king, it is the fool who'll lie
across the tracks; the fool, not I.

After listening to the students' views, I asked them to compare "My Shadow" to "First Writing Since," reminding them that despite the poems' dissimilarities, each had received the same number of high ratings. A boy who had given Hammad's poem a "10" and Szyborska's an "6," citing his initial confusion with the latter, now announced that "My Shadow" is just a better poem." He explained that in demanding more Szyborska's poem also repaid more, and courted his interest longer by challenging him; he needed and wanted to reread it, whereas "First Writing Since" satisfied him after one hearing. He also thought that our more speculative discussion about "My Shadow" confirmed its quality. Szyborska proved her artistry by provoking rather than fulfilling.

These two types of poem represent two conflicting ambitions for contemporary poetry, one seeking accessibility and inclusiveness, the other refusing to sacrifice quality in pursuit of these goals. Some of my students provide a clue to the popularity of the first trend, arriving in my class conditioned—I assume by a previous teacher—to fear poetry as a minefield of symbols, allusions, or meters. No wonder so many Americans leave school craving a poetry that soothes rather than stresses, one that requires neither analysis nor knowledge of prosody. My own generation might trace its preference for reader-friendly poetry to the Modernists, whose entrenchment in college curriculums coincided with our literary educations. These notoriously obscure poets and the scaffolding of scholarship required to understand them drove some of my classmates to swear off difficult verse forever.

My impatience with those who seek to popularize poetry hasn't kept me from employing their tactics in the classroom, but I try to instill in my students Hass's original notion that only a few excellent poems emerge in any century. I don't advocate holding out for these gems at the expense of anthologies, slams, or other crowd-pleasing projects, just that we acknowledge their superiority to what currently passes for great. By failing to do so, readers allow themselves and their poets to settle for easy gratification. After all, what matters is not the amount of poetry produced, read, or heard in any era, but the quality of the writing and our response to it.