The Sublime Utility of Poetry

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THE SUBLIME UTILITY OF POETRY

I.

Throughout recorded history, and no doubt before, people have written, listened to and read poetry. I once took the phenomenon for granted—it simply is. Lately, however, in a world dominated by technology, engineering, digital communication, spread sheets, rubrics, assessment grids and the like, I often wonder if poetry will become a casualty to this avalanche. But, lo! -- the internet itself now hosts an ever-increasing proliferation of poetry magazines and sites (many of them now superior to the print journals of old, which I could not have predicted only a few years ago.) The question is why? Why do people need much less write poetry? The need transcends color, creed, gender and politics. Why is poetry “useful,” if we dare apply such a utilitarian term to the art? And by the way, whatever I say about poetry applies equally well to art in general. In the broader sense, why do people need art? Why is aesthetic satisfaction so crucial to well-being? [See my poem, “The Evolution of Hello . . . ,” in the Collection that follows as a somewhat facetious take on the origins of language in general]

At some point in my poetry classes, whether creative writing or literature, I stop the class and ask point blank: “Who needs poetry? It doesn’t cure disease, make you rich, fortify the infrastructure, eliminate poverty, and so on. So what good is it? Why are you in this class? An easy “A” (though quite a few think it not so easy)? At first many students seem dumbfounded by the question, as if they had never thought about it before. Then hands start to slowly rise. The most common answer, “It’s therapeutic.” Which signifies to me a definite medical, spiritual and psychological usefulness. Others might say, “It allows me to express myself.” So I ask, why is it important to express yourself? “So I won’t feel alone,” the usual answer, in league with the former “therapeutic” values. Recently, a former student of mine who is publishing a lot of his poetry these days came to class to do a reading (he has graduated but keeps in touch), and his answer to the question was beautifully put: “It helps us get through.” Again, the therapeutic magic.

Obviously, not everyone needs or desires poetry. But quite a few do, and those who so need and desire have been with us for millennia. The current turn in universities toward emphasis on technology, with a resulting diminution of attention to the arts, is therefore
extremely worrisome. What is the point of mere technology and its marvels without the intellectual, spiritual and soulful pleasure that it can and does enable? I note that during the winter Olympics in Russia, the first thing the Russian hosts paraded out during the opening ceremonies was a litany of the great Russian artists, composers and poets—these, and not so much technological achievements, were regarded as the highest and most sublime qualities of Russian history. So even the technocrats are aware of the need for art and poetry, however shabbily artists and poets may be treated while alive. The case of Stalin’s constant humiliation of Shostakovich comes to mind. In the end, however, the composer easily outwitted the brutal dictator by creating music of a majesty and magnitude Stalin could never grasp.

Enter the Covid-19 pandemic . . .

The Corona came down like a wolf on the fold (apologies to Lord Byron)

At first during the first weeks of quarantine and lockdown I felt that poetry was more irrelevant than ever. Only the medical experts and scientists mattered. Which of course they do—not politics and ideology. But as I converted my classes to online email versions of themselves, I discovered that many students were submitting poems directly addressing their personal experiences with the drastic disruption in their lives as well as their heightened fears and anxieties. I expected some of it but not such overwhelming abundance. Obviously, every poet in the world, professionals and amateurs, would be writing Corona virus poems. The Collective We seemed hungry for it. I wondered what I, a mere humble writer of poetry and fiction, could do to help. I was no first responder, no front-line essential worker—how could someone like myself help even if only in a modest, minor way? The fact that my students were emailing me poems daily about the virus, the fact that we could no longer share their poems in a classroom setting . . . I had an idea. What if I started a Group on Facebook devoted to the poems of my students, a cyberspace where they could still read each other’s poems and react to them in as personal manner as possible? Worth a try.

So I launched a group with the ungainly title of Gallo Students Poetry Jam. I invited my current students to post their poems (I taught a class of Beginning Poetry Writing, Advanced Poetry Writing, and an Honors class called Texts and Contexts, the latter a hybrid of the study of poetry in general and beginning poetry writing.) The students seemed overjoyed to post their
poetry. So I figured, why not invite all of my students, those current and those from the past, to join? Soon students from decades ago were posting. So I thought, why not allow the students to invite their interested friends to join? And the friends did join. So I thought, why not invite colleagues as well? So I did. And some joined if only to read the poems, not necessarily to post any. As I write we approach 240 members in good standing. I had hoped for maybe 25, if that. Now I’m figuring, why not invite anybody interested? So, if you are, you will need to go to my Facebook page—Lou Gallo—and search the Group Listings for Gallo Students Poetry Jam.

If nothing else, I hope this idea can served as a model for what any writing teacher might launch for their own students. Zoom comes to mind as a better option, but at the moment, Zoom is something I have not mastered, though I plan to learn it this summer. I firmly believe that we will wind up back in cyberspace rather than in the classroom for the next semester or two. This virus will continue to spread for a while. It shows no signs of relenting, especially now with the relaxing of social distancing measures.

What mostly impressed me was the gratitude my students expressed for the opportunity to unveil themselves in group fashion. The experience proved cathartic for them and me as well. I even saw that some students were suddenly writing better poems! And some students from the mostly lower level Honors course, none English majors, none having ever written a poem in their lives, were suddenly writing beautiful, intelligent poetry and either posting it themselves or allowing me to post it for them, with their permission. The Group is probably about a month or so old now, and perhaps it will wither away or perhaps expand and flourish. Much will probably depend upon the condition of the planet in coming months. Whatever happens, it has served and is serving both an aesthetic and psychological need, a hunger for the sublime rather than brooding over the wretched, despairing condition we now find it almost impossible to escape.

All of us, together while apart, every person on the planet. Who could have predicted? 
*The Corona came down like a wolf on the fold.*

And, as I like to joke, “A poem a day/Keeps Dr. Phil away.” May the poetry be with you!
METAPHOR

Fuse, say, the planet Jupiter
the red spot of which you behold

through your Edmund Scientific
telescope with a saltine cracker,

though I prefer sodium free,
even if they have nothing

in common save your own
brash, mad, tectonic wizardry

and you have presided over
a perhaps absurd yet original

marriage,

though, it seems, that
since crackers and Jupiter

share identical atoms

and a great deal of chemical
constituencies

and were both smashed together
in the primal, Ur-seed

of the nascent universe,
the wedding took place eons ago,

before anyone could begin
to imagine that someone like you

would come along with your
paltry legerdemain
and insist they renew their vows.

THE WONDERFUL WORD BECAUSE

Automatic cause and effect, instant, end of conversation, and sometimes it suffices by itself—WHY? BECAUSE! . . .nothing further needed or desired because who wants intricate reasoning, a thing of the past when you had time to lie back on an ottoman, puff your opium, contemplate the vicissitudes and free trade and the glory of empire, all tokens of an age long defunct, a time of parlor lamps with fringed shades, wallpaper of bouquets, damsels in red with woeful eyes . . .

now listen to the fighter bombers grind through the sky, right above your house, on the way to combat evil everywhere, now, when the plutocracy has rendered us impoverished and we chant Yo Ho Heave Ho all the daylight through and dream of iguanas that breathe fire and teeth inching down from the ceiling and contagious epidemics, oh, it’s a phase shift all right, a tectonic upheaval, the world now, this rugged green planet churning through space though clogged with debris and plastic and carbon footprints
and microbes—and it’s probably too late
to make amends, to rectify, to accommodate . . .
because the obvious has never been more obvious
and we want nothing more glorious than
to distinguish ourselves as we waltz out
of history along with our visions and dreams
and art and music, soon relics for the roaches.
Why have we so mauled ourselves?
Because.

HOW TO WRITE YOUR POEM

Slather olive oil into the cast iron pan
(that may or may not be your mind)
and crack the shell against its edge.
Pour the entrails carefully--
this time you want sunny-side-up
not a scrambled chaos. Ignite the flame.
Keep your eye on the yolk. Don’t let it
dehydrate into a flat, chalky wedge.
When firm and round (the symbol of perfection)
slide it onto your spatula then a plate,
let’s hope fine china.
Dip your bread into the center
and savor such juice.
Don’t fret over what it might have been
or become had you not intervened.
This is why consciousness entered the universe.
This is why you had no choice.
This is why you regret everything.

CLICHES

we hate them because they’re usually true
we love them because they replace thinking—
look, there goes one on wing like that bird of a feather . . .
and they come and go:
whoever says now “dead as a doornail”
(what the hell is a doornail anyway?)

sometimes they’re single words
like “awesome” or “dude”—
if everything is awesome,
nothing is awesome
(what a wanton destruction of a beautiful word—
I hope it never happens to “sublime”)

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sometimes they come
in phrases, like families
in a station wagon
on the way to the lagoon:
“I’m up to my neck”

but worse, using the noun
as an adjective:
you’re so cliché
(should be clichéd)
that I bet you earned
that penny saved

BOOK SALE
I’m always first in line for the library book sale,
even now, after all these years, when the need
for a rush over some rare edition,
exquisite vellum or intricate leather,
has thinned like vapor from a nozzle.
Love is a kind of habit, like eating,
and after a while you just feed,
forgetting the magnificent entree
or even appetizer that once convinced you
it was worth the wait, the time, your life,
though you suspect no such tidbit ever existed,
that you’d have to cook or write it yourself
if only you had the talent, vision, wisdom
and taste.

But today I slouch
in the parking lot behind the steering wheel
and while gazing at passing cars I spot,
across the street, a heavy yellow machine,
ravenous as ancient reptiles, rips, tears
and bludgeons an old building to pieces.
Beyond this annihilation, I can’t see much.
We’re enveloped by haze this morning.
It is comforting to know there are people
operating machines, who know which levers
to pull at precisely the right moments
so that even demolition proceeds
with a kind of finesse.

THE EVOLUTION OF HELLO,
THE DEVOLUTION OF GRASP:
A LECTURE

Our hirsute ancestors grasped before
they spoke.
Speech, do re me, our glass-shattering falsetto,
mere epiphenomena,
something new and hip
like green stamps with the broccoli.

By “grasp” do not presume eureka
which seems most natural to presume
but wrong:
we mean ejaculation in all innocence—
clutching with the digits
or as it were
fine sensory-motor coordination.

clasping, pointing, clapping,
slugging, swinging, rubbing
palms against the cool wall
of a cave or lover’s abdomen

Item: the neo-cortical folds evolve
from hairy-handedness
as it veers into self-control.

And thus we say hello!

Which leads experts to believe
it’s hand, not tongue, saliva, lip,
throat, ear, tooth or gums
that strain alphabet from soup.

So rather than foot in mouth,
we find our forebears plunging fists
into their brains (up to the wrists!)
to pluck immaculate conceits
from the muck

Hail digital thumb
and dream
the Ur-complicity

The pencil is on the table, Mable.
Jean et Phillipe etudiant.
Dulce et decorum est. Mori. Adios.
All men are Socrates. Socrates is a man . . . or
hey, honey, how’s your sign?

(References: Orr and Cappannari, “The Origin of Language”; Weston La Barre, The Human Animal)

MOONLIGHT MADNESS

They’ve knocked
fifty percent
off Emerson’s eyeball.
And get this—
no batteries!

NOT WORTH READING

Not worth reading,
these dreary poems
on hangnails or buttons
as if to make specks incandesce
by yearning . . .
but then, you’re getting old.
In that mad diaspora of youth
you too pursued stitches, a bruised heel.
Words age too,
creak like covered wagons
sifting through Nebraska.
No longer the naked beauties
that kept you permanently drunk.
So when the sky cracks open
with light you’ve forgotten,
you feel the old tug, the glamor.
You see her too,
the one you told goodbye,
and more than her--
so many swaying
on a gentle, swelling horizon.
There is no return
but you rush with open arms,
fingers pinching wildly
at any floozied vowel
that will sell itself
for a song.

OCCASIONED BY A VISIT TO HOLLINS
I, also pilgrim, stood on the bank of Tinker Creek
While awaiting my daughters to make their rounds
About campus. We had seen two white cranes
Soar overhead, later two turtle doves in the gravel,
And Maddie spotted a bluebird perched on a willow branch.
Good omens, we rejoiced, prophetic pioneering.
The rational mind knows only boundaries, chance.
It forgets what lingers in the sky, the roses, the trees,
The water and blue-black soil, what royal auguries
Slip in through vision, hunch and dream, what
Animals know and those crazed out of education—
everything is connected, intertwined, from worm
To hawk, rainbow to stream, shamanic fusion.
There is no chance despite what logicians say
Nor time despite the imminence of Doomsday.
Nor did our cat Sweetie die the next day
Though a sudden knock at the door brought a lily
In a laced glass vase from the veterinarian staff.
I’m kissing the joys as they fly today
As I should have done throughout history
From Ur to Nineveh to Jericho
But could not because locked in the prison-house
Of chronology. Neither angel nor beast,
I’ve broken free! For this moment at least.

A SNAPSHOT OF PABLO NERUDA

I stare at the photo of Pablo Neruda
on the dust jacket of a book
of his collected poems.
The name, of course, Pablo Neruda
is what makes me stare,
searching for secrets.
Without the name it could well
be that photo of my great uncle
Achille who played a very bad cello.
Or perhaps anyone’s crusty uncle,
the one who never comes
to your parties, the one who
kicked his wife into the street.
Replace it with the photo of someone else
and I’d still stare. Pablo Neruda
could look like anyone
in Houston or Madrid
or Olympus.

EATING POETRY

The poem faded as I read it,
the words evaporating in tiny
bubbles, froth, the way water
vaporizes on a hot stove.
I wanted to preserve what I could
so I wrapped what was left
of the poem in waxed paper
so it would not leak or stick
to anything. I slid it onto
a shelf of the refrigerator
and set about my business.

When I returned, late, late
that evening, I was so hungry
I sought out leftovers,
found the poem, unwrapped it,
slapped on some yellow mustard,
paprika and curcumin power
and ate it. Best poem
I ever ate. But bitter, sour.
Next time I’ll try cardamom,
sweet cream and nutmeg.

Fresh off the page is best of course
but digestion takes time.

READING LIST

I have never read the Decameron
but I plan to.
I know all about it
but it has slipped through the cracks.
I have fifteen different versions,
some leather bound, many illustrated
with woodcuts or steel engravings
by the likes of Dore & co.
My reading list extends to three
hundred and fifty years—
and of course I’ll have to add more time
for books not yet published,
so make that five hundred years.
I’ve never read War and Peace either.
I’ve tried but don’t like all that family
saga imbroglio—except for the way
Marquez and Dostoevsky do it.
I much prefer the latter to Tolstoy
though everyone calls *War and Peace*
the greatest novel ever written.
I’ve never relied on critics;
I make my own decisions
when it comes to compiling a list.
But how will I ever read
the collected works of Lope de Vega?
Add another three hundred years.

THE WORD “NEVERTHELESSS”

How it re-directs backwards
to what once was before
the coup d’etat
that changed what once was.
The bloated general huffing
as he polishes his medals.