

Thoughts on Race and Poetry in America

When pondering the question, “How come white American poets have not written more about race?” posed in bracing fashion recently by Major Jackson in his essay “A Mystifying Silence: Big and Black,” my mind doesn’t come up so much against the staples of discussion about race as it does the modes of American poetry. By that I mean that the issues of avoidance and engagement pivot around how poems are written in this society at this time or to put it another way—what a poem can be.

What a poem can typically be in this still Protestant society is a declaration of the self. Take away the “I” from contemporary American poetry and a lot of it disappears into the ether. Of course, much poetry, including much classical poetry, has always used the “I.” There is no inherent wrong in representing some version of one’s self in a poem. The issue is how much the self is automatic, a congeries of reactions. The issue is how much that “I” is a world in its own right. To be sure, the self as it spews declarations, wants, wishes, fancies, notions and more or less endless mental constructions is unto itself. It may not get what it wants but that doesn’t slow it down.

If one ponders a classical poet such as Horace or Catullus who puts himself in the poem as a persona, one is struck by an awareness on the part of the poet as to who this self is. This self exists in relation to various codes of conduct (or misconduct) and can be seen in that light. The love affairs of Catullus are among many affairs being conducted in Rome; Horace isn’t the only fellow who retires to the country. This self is thoroughly socialized and doesn’t regret that fact. The self gains from social definition since it is able to construct comparisons and contrasts. Socialization enriches identity rather than enfeebles it.

This isn’t how the self works in contemporary American poetry. In a modern, technology-adoring, psychology-oriented society that possesses more than a residue of Christian attributes and outlooks, the self is the nexus of much anxiety and yearning. Trying to define one’s self against the background of American pluralism is a big job; we know because one of the godfathers of American poetry, Walt Whitman, took it on. When one looks at the epic quality of *Leaves of Grass*, one may pause. The openness of the pre-Civil War era and the manner in which Whitman stood outside and inside of the society at the same time are not where we are now. Whitman’s saluting of this or that American type would seem sentimental and false in the current climate, if not condescending. It’s not that I doubt Whitman’s heart here. The democratic vistas to which he attested, however, are not the ones we see. The sheer degree to which money has obliterated fellow feeling would be one example of this change. The accumulation of many material possessions was not what Walt Whitman was looking for in this world. He proclaimed the gifts of spirit. He inhaled the cosmos and he exhaled it. The self he represents is much more than the account of various incidents in his life.

There remain, however, similarities that echo over time in regards to self and society, patterns that work both on a micro level and a macro one. The prime one is the idealism that distinguishes

American democracy, the belief that we are a God-blessed people who have achieved the ultimate form of government. That the nation's formation resides on two tragedies—murder of the native peoples and slavery—is somehow beside the point, history's friction. We are terminally good—to put it bluntly, however ludicrous the statement may seem. This mix of self-congratulation and high-mindedness creates a curious disjunction: Americans are, at once, in possession of a government that is a gift to humankind and Americans are restless pursuers of individual happiness. They are settled and unsettled at the same time, part public opinion and part stark individualism. They have been able to offer their example to the world and yet practice racism at home as if there was no hypocrisy involved whatsoever. As any senator from Alabama could have explained, laws follow social practices. Yet, America is about striving toward “a more perfect union” (a phrase at once inviting and illogical since there are no degrees to perfection) and Whitman, as much as he was in love with sheer being, was a striver. He wanted America to be a real democracy where people accepted and rejoiced in one another and he willed that vision of America in *Leaves of Grass*. The extent of this striving can never be underestimated in looking at the American character. Americans may not know what they are chasing but they are in pursuit.

Whitman's self was bound to shrink, so to speak. The more Americans are engaged in the nitty-gritty of actually living with one another, the less the encompassing self has to say. Yet rhetorical, social and religious habits of testifying do not go gentle into the night. “Call me Walt” is a tag that most American poets gladly appropriate in the sense of putting themselves at the center of their poems. This is natural possessiveness—my childhood, my memories, my trip to Atlantic City—and natural American purblindness. The opportunity to pursue happiness on an individual basis is not to be taken lightly nor is the opportunity to declare one's self. The issue, where the purblind aspect comes in, is not only what it is that these declarations acknowledge but what comes first—the given world or that putative maker of the world, the self? And how does that given world affect the self as the self goes about its days?

“Given world” is not an American phrase. There is no such thing in the self-created (“We declare...”) United States. We are brought up in one era or another—the Jazz Age, the Depression, the 60s, the Coming of the Internet—but the only world the nation instinctively honors is dynamism, which is to say, progress. How this progress plays out is complex and not infrequently ironic. Race relations, for instance, were once taken as a given. Clearly that was wrong. The endless notions of white folks about race that filled the public and private spaces of the nation turned out to be so much often poisonous verbiage without a particle of truth to them. We can castigate those who did this spewing as being shortsighted to say nothing of vicious, complacent and dishonorable. But that doesn't get us very far down the road. Once one has blamed, what does one do next? Sit around and glory in one's sanctity? Do some more blaming? Lose interest?

One of the dilemmas of the American poet in the second half of the twentieth century and in the beginning of the twenty-first is that he or she—black and white—is tethered to some notion of progress and labors under that burden. That is to say the world must get better in some fashion

for one to live in it; tomorrow is inherently more interesting than yesterday. This betterment must be measurable. And, indeed, being able to eat in public places or sit where one wants on a bus or vote does represent betterment. But after that where does progress go? I would argue that one domain is self-improvement, that promise that connects the internal engine to the external circumstances. (Dale Carnegie meets Oprah Winfrey.) Each American has the putative chance (very putative in many socio-economic environs) not only to improve his or her lot but also to improve his or her self. This isn't an official matter. There are no young communists here. Yet it is the forward-looking thing to do. Everyone has the chance to testify—the crucial Protestant term and so different a one from confessing the blues—to his or her own personal betterment. So white folks can write about guilt and panic and misapprehension about black folks while understanding that such writing is praiseworthy in its sincerity. The context is not crucial because there seems to be no context in a society of endless selves, each one of which is offering its scenario. In other words, everything is anecdotal, responsive and personal, a tale told not so much by an idiot, as a more or less vigilant witness of one's psyche. At the center of this performance sits the tireless self.

What American poetry runs into on the issue of the self isn't simple prejudice or even lack of concern, though it is certainly more than possible for a white person to live and die in this country and have very little to do with African Americans. (Though geography sometimes determines these circumstances, so does something called "white flight." You also don't see many ads for a vacation in west Baltimore.) What poetry runs into is acknowledging the terrain that was there before the self came into the world and that will be around after the particular self is gone. I don't mean here something that gets called "human nature" because that is typically a lie that an era tells itself to flatter its prejudices. I mean the wages of history, that which goes into informing the simplest of circumstances and that runs at great depths and in many directions.

What appalls about history is how chastening it is. One thinks one knows but one doesn't. How could one? The corridors are endless and the points of view myriad. We can read dozens of books about a figure such as Thomas Jefferson or an event such as the Crash of 1929 and keep on reading. We can live through an era and keep pondering: what was that Cold War? Historical reality remains a hall of mirrors. History, however, need not reduce us to relativism nor need it reduce us to impotence or avoidance. Even a mild dose of history is bound to contain some of that suffering truth from which wisdom may spring.

The American instinct is to renounce history as a blockage; it keeps you from moving forward. This is the New World not the Old one. "History is more or less bunk," as one prominent if less than eloquent American put it. This plays out in American life and in American poetry in the instinct to substitute the individual for the sum of historical circumstances. There is little temptation for a poet to get out of him or herself when the individual is the funnel of all experiences. First person is testimony; third person is a mix of observation and imagining. First person is more real, more honest, more sincere, more personal—all the good attributes. The weight of history need not apply because the genius of poetry lies in its ability to present moments as if they had more weight than they have. For better and worse, history is cumulative.

I think that white people have a much harder time acknowledging that historical weight than black people. If you are black, history never goes away. How could it? The chain of the years is palpable and then some. When one reads about James Baldwin's father castigating white people as "devils," one feels not only one man's attitude. One also feels the anguish of centuries. If you are white, however, you can buy into possibility as a way of living, that pursuit of happiness that acknowledges no hurdles and can start anew elsewhere. You, too, if you are white, male and believe in God, can be President. (Some of these "given" conditions have changed; some haven't.) For African Americans the world that history has imbued comes first. Everything is impregnated with it. This is the nightmare of oppression but also the opportunity of deep sight stemming from deep roots. In either case, the world that history has imbued authoritatively exists.

Major Jackson goes after poetry in this regard because poetry isn't concerned with characters, drama and setting in the manner that fiction is. Realistic fiction can't live without some degree of a historical world. Albert Murray and Joyce Carole Oates, Philip Roth and Toni Morrison are all on the same page here. Poetry is different. As it remains determinedly lyrical amid often un-lyrical circumstances, contemporary poetry is rooted in that self that seems to create the world with words (or does in much post-modern, language-based practice). To a fiction writer this may seem ridiculous but to a poet it makes good sense: the declarative self is the source of poetic power. Take away that self and you take away the authority of poetry that resides in some species of wordy integrity.

Thus the import of much contemporary poetry isn't to render a world and the complications and misunderstandings that litter that world. The import is to allow an expressive self to speak to whatever it chooses to speak to. The self comes before the world. The failure to address race on the part of white people stems as much from this outlook as it does from anything. Why write about black people if they aren't in your immediate purview? You might encounter a black person on a subway and then you would write a poem about it but that's not the same thing as rendering a world in its historical depth. That's not to take away from the intensity that distinguishes these encounters; it is to say that the depth and otherness that fiction almost automatically provides are not the stuff of anecdotal poems. An anecdote is just that—a sketch, a moment, a gist, an extended twinge. This accords well with poetry's trying to say the unsayable. Usually the larger a poem gets, the more unwieldy it becomes (the view of Valéry, Poe and Donald Justice among others). This view doesn't however do much in terms of rendering the stubborn historical glimmers that are bound to be there in any racial situation in the United States. History is always there—no matter what happens to the adventitious self. Maybe a white person meets a black person in some fashion, maybe he or she doesn't. Black people are still there living their lives—an absurd remark to make but in this context a necessary one.

Good poems about anything are hard to write; it's a taxing art. It's also an art that resists the programmatic. Plenty of tolerable paintings came from the ethos of the WPA. I doubt that many poems did. What strikes me in the discussion of poetry and race is the sad fact that there are a lot

of poems out there, imperfect as they may be on both sides of the racial divide, that could be used by people but aren't. Every high school in this nation could offer a course on poetry and race. There are plenty of poems to go around. What is lacking is an interest in engaging those poems. The news they bear is too raw and unsettling. To be sure the poems by white hands may be naïve, coy, wrongheaded, narrow and distressingly partial in their points of view (the flaws of poems by African-American hands would answer to other adjectives). Still, they do exist. Something, such as the *Letters to America* anthology, is better than nothing. This democracy remains an experiment.

For my part, I have written a handful of poems over the course of thirty years about race. Though each one has taken a sort of effort that makes writing a poem feel commensurate with a novel, I make no special claims for them. Many poems are like that. I will say that in poems such as "Goethe in Kentucky" I have tried to fashion worlds with other people in them who exist beyond the narrator's purview. Poetry is only as good as its ways and means but poetry is also only as good as it is willing to go to where good intentions will not be enough.