Poetry as a Development of Human Empathy

by

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ABSTRACT

The generation following post-modernism has been left with little to the imagination. In a world defined by continual technological distraction, Millennials absorb their world primarily through visual media. Where, then, is there a place for poetry, and how do writers reconcile a narcissistic world monopolized by "selfies" and virtual communication? How does a poet use the "I" selflessly in order to achieve the universal? "Poetry as a Development of Human Empathy" attempts to bridge the divide between everyday society and poets that has been growing since experimental writing became more widely accepted after the atomic bomb, while exploring reasons as to how poetry has alienated itself as an art and ways in which poets might find a way back into being an important force in the world.

DEDICATION

For my Family

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Poetry as a Development of Human Empathy

"The highest accomplishment of human consciousness is the imagination and the highest accomplishment of the imagination is empathy and the ability to love."

—Dean Young, The Art of Recklessness

Every story has a beginning, middle, and end, not just literature, but life. To talk about where I am in writing, how my readings have influence my work, where I am going, I'd like to start with where I began. Coming into the program, I did not have a large amount of exposure to reading poetry. I read the assigned anthologies and books from my undergraduate level workshops, but those classes were always more about our writing, and I was a selfish writer, I always had been. I began writing during high school because I loved music and words, because it was a process of self-catharsis, an act of recording thought and coming to a better understanding of my existence, the experiences I was living. Of course, my first poems were fits of adolescent love trauma meant for guitar accompaniment (I hadn't read Rilke yet). I needed a way to make sense of a world which didn't always make sense, a way to understand suddenly having grown up and felt things and thought things I had never felt or thought before, and writing provided that opportunity. I realized that the world was not only complex (although I had never suspected it was simple), but surprise—it wasn't always about me, how I felt, or what I wanted.

I wasn't a "selfish" child—I volunteered for community service projects, helped to lead my high school marching band as drum major, and would even take my mom out to her favorite Italian restaurant on Mother's Day. What a delightful facade I put on as a

child. The problem with these activities was that they really were about me—I wanted to be a good person, I wanted people to think I was a good person doing the right things, reaching *my* potential. I wanted to be the best I could for everybody else. I owed them that. Isn't that what writing was all about to me—*me*, reaching *my* potential? I, making sure people listened to whatever important thing it was I had to say.

I wasn't good at much else, anyway. Math was always a struggle, but I'd always been a good writer. And there's nothing wrong with wanting to succeed, especially if you know it's what you're good at—but when you volunteer for your community to pick up trash because you want to be recognized, not because you want to keep the Earth from filling up with cigarette-butts and plastic bags like a too-small office trash bin, you're doing it for the wrong reasons. When you lead a marching band because you want the responsibility, the attention and responsibility—you're not doing it for the right reasons. I was young. I did a lot of things for the wrong reasons. And now I'm older, and hopefully—maybe—a bit wiser.

During my undergraduate years, as I began to take my writing more seriously, I started coming to a better understanding of how I was doing the right things, but often for the wrong reasons. I knew there was nothing wrong about writing for oneself—to meditate and reflect—to become a better person through the act of coming to an understanding about what I'd experienced in this life. The problem, I realized, is sometimes that's not enough. Sometimes, the world needs more than “you” just coming to an understanding about what “you” felt. The world needs more than your own personal satisfaction, your own catharsis. The world needs action. It needs people—people to say something that isn't necessarily about themselves, but something else, something more

important, something everyone needs to hear and pay attention to. Maybe something to do with our friends and family, our children and grandchildren, their children's children. Something to do with the future. The story goes on, and we may contribute a stanza, or perhaps even only a line. A word. A syllable. Maybe we are only the breath between. But what do we do as writers? We start a conversation.

So I asked myself these questions: how could I speak for other people, particularly those without a voice? Should I even speak for other people? Do I have the right? Does poetry even have to be about politics, about making the world a better place? Or should it be about anything and everything else? Are these even the right questions? The problem at the time was that because I had not exposed to enough proper resources or books, I was unable to find the answer to any of these questions. Not even the beginnings of an answer, not the first words that would say *yes, yes this is the answer you're looking for*, not even a *no, you must look elsewhere*, because I didn't know where to start. Thankfully, the literature I have read and studied over the past three years, the classes I have taken with my professors, and the conversations I've had with my fellow writers and friends—these moments, people, and books have helped me to develop my imagination, and in turn my ability to empathize and love, to discover possible answers to these questions I've raised, and to ask more questions, to understand where I can continue to seek questions and answers even after my time in this program.

It is amazing how much time passes between first planting the seeds of a thought and actualizing that thought in reality, turning it into an action. I've had these questions since I began to take writing seriously as an undergraduate, and only now do I feel I know enough to where I am beginning to respond to them in my work. Still, that's not to

say I have definitive answers for any of these questions I've raised, and moreover, that's not to say these are even the right questions or answers, or all the questions I should be asking of myself and of literature—but it's a start. This paper, and the readings reflected in them, are the beginnings of a conversation, the closing of one chapter in my story, the start of another. While I still incorporate and maintain the use of personal experience in my work, I knew I wanted to allow my poetry to grow into a more universal or worldly experience that others could relate to, and I'm finally confident enough in my work and my reading to start saying yes, this is what I've been looking for.

How poetics ties into the universal message and reception of poetry is an important relationship. Poetry is often about starting small before saying something big. It's about beginning with an image. A setting. An objective correlative. A triggering subject. The first essay on poetics I read was Richard Hugo's *The Triggering Town*. In his essay "The Triggering Subject," Hugo begins:

> "You'll never be a poet until you realize that everything I say today and this quarter is wrong. It may be right for me, but it is wrong for you. Every moment, I am, without wanting or trying to, telling you to write like me. But I hope you learn to write like you. In a sense, I hope I don't teach you how to write but how to teach yourself how to write" (3).

If this is true—and I took it as truth—why bother to study craft? Much of the way we approach our life and poetics is based in abstract theory founded on subjective aesthetic values we assign to ethics and literature, both intentionally and subconsciously. In *The Art of Recklessness*, Dean Young speaks to how writers assign these hierarchical aesthetic values, stating "Form itself is a matter of exclusion. Art is the presence of one

mark above another, decisions about what is inside, what outside" (158). As writers, for every inclusive decision we make on the page—whether it is the use of narrative, a disposition toward lyric, or using the word "imagination" instead of "puberty"—we exclude an infinite amount of other choices we could have made in the making of the poem. We have made one mark above another.

It becomes easy to dismiss language by arguing that a reader will take what they need from a poem or story instead of what was intended by the author. In other words, language fails us. Dean Young himself submits, "We have no choice but to acknowledge the artificiality of our means, the construct of language, the artifice of any poem as a series of literary devices" (*The Art of Recklessness* 9). Yet still, the question inevitably arises—what makes a good poem? What defines truly great poetry? When asked this question, Muriel Rukeyser responded, "and what has to be said to such a question is that these are people who cannot trust their emotional reactions, their total reactions" (*Life of Poetry* 18). If Rukeyser is right (and I think she is), then what she's saying is that poetry hinges on the emotional and intellectual reaction of an audience toward an author's work. It then may seem as if a poem is almost (if not completely) out of the author's control in conveying a particular intention, but we know that's not true. If it were true, if certain literature didn't change us and affect us, we wouldn't have stories and poems that live beyond their time and creator—great art wouldn't be remembered.

If a good piece of literature, as Rukeyser puts it, "invites you to feel. More than that: it invites you to respond. And better than that: a poem invites a total response" (*Life of Poetry* 11). A series of decisions a poet makes when writing and editing *does* change and shape the way an audience reacts. I view poetics and craft as tools in a shed. If my

mind is an infinite backyard in rural Maine, and in that backyard is a shed, and I have all the room in the world, why should I discriminate as to what tools I include in my arsenal of instruments? Each poem is a new poem, and each poem I write is always an opportunity to try something new and different. Wouldn't any sane man or woman acknowledge that it's best to have an infinite amount of resources at one's disposal?

The problem with this viewpoint is that the world doesn't always need everything from us. We have to pick and choose what we give it based on its needs. The world is busy enough as it is with 1 billion cars, thousands of airplanes, people entering and exiting terminals by the tick of the watch. Every day, 400,000 babies are born for every 150,000 people who die. The world population increases by 90 million people a year. There are revolutions and rebellions, social injustices and wars happening around Earth, in our own country. With a setting, an image, and a question that speaks to these complications, Rukeyser begins her book *The Life of Poetry.* She is on the deck of a ship at night with other foreigner refugees being deported from Spain during the beginning days of the Spanish Civil War. Seemingly, almost out of nowhere, a man—a printer—asks, “"And poetry—among all this—where is there a place for poetry?"” (3). She replies “Then I began to say what I believe.”

We must ask ourselves as writers, now more than ever—what does the world need right now from us? This question should always help to define what poetry should demand of us. This question brings to light to why we should continue to write literature, and in what way (craft included) we should go about doing it. It is, as Rukeyser writes, “"your responsibility. . . go home; tell your peoples what you have seen"” (*Life of Poetry*

2). Thus, my subjective aesthetic preferences are a response to how I think poetry and literature needs to respond to our world in its current state of crisis.

Right now, poetry is not doing enough. Because the world is always changing, now at a faster rate than ever, poetry must always be changing with it. Dean Young puts it well, saying, "Poetry always needs more fuel, different fuel. For every time poetry has consumed itself, it has managed to turn up elsewhere, incendiary, primitive, unable to be snuffed out" (*The Art of Recklessness* 10). Movements within poetry, as a result, are often a reflection of their time, and a rejection or acceptance of previously established artistic conventions. Young brings light to more recent aesthetic movements, providing some possible reasons as to why art is always changing, growing, and rejecting previous notions:

> Aesthetic positions are often drawn toward their own extinction, be it through the impossibilities of their aims or the ruination brought about by their success. Romantic transcendence incorporated its own failure in order to continue; dada made central to itself not only its failure but the failure of any other artistic position and expression; surrealism posited a utopic position that was not interested in the production of literary artifacts, as Andre Breton said, but rather the use of poetic/artistic processes to accomplish the ruination of a shackled intellect and the liberation of another kind of mind. In the case of art that defines itself as resistance, its continued effectiveness is dependent upon the continued health of that which it resists, just as the vitality of a virus depends upon the continued survival of its host (*The Art of Recklessness* 7-8).

In other words, if a convention or movement succeeds, its usefulness has been fulfilled and must be reevaluated as to whether or not it is needed. If a convention is rejected, it is because it is not useful or conducive to what needs to be said or heard by the world. In constantly dying and being reborn aesthetically, poetry constantly reverts back to its

fundamental state—reinventing and repositioning itself in life so that it is central to the occasion which needs to be addressed.

One example we can look at in order to unpack the idea of a particular aesthetic position, how it is born and how it fades, is the Modernists. It is important to consider past movements in literature and art as a whole because, as Robert Pinsky says, “we learn many of our attitudes toward language and reality from the past. . . it takes considerable effort by a poet either to understand and apply those attitudes, for his own purposes, or to abandon them” (*The Situation of Poetry* 4). In coming to some agreement about what Modernism aimed to do both aesthetically and culturally, and whether or not it succeeded, contemporary writers can come to a better understanding of why Modernism might have succeeded or failed in positively influencing world politics and culture.

Crane, Eliot, Pound, Williams (and others) almost completely overturned and rejected Romanticism as a result of what we commonly accept as two main reasons. The first is that as artists, the Modernists were looking for something completely new artistically. This was possibly motivated by the second commonly accepted aim of the Modernist movement, which was a response to the disillusionment caused by the First and Second World Wars. Romanticism, partly a response to (and rejection of) the Industrial Revolution, stressed the individual, strong emotion and imagination, and to some extent, viewed art as a noble pursuit that would change society in a positive way. Pinsky says of Modernist poetry as a direct response to Romanticism, “The premises of their work included a mistrust of abstraction and statement, a desire to escape the blatantly conventional aspects of form, and an ambition to grasp the fluid, absolutely particular life of the physical world by using. . . the techniques of "imagism," which

convey the powerful illusion that a poet presents, rather than tells about, a sensory experience" (Pinsky 3).

The disenchantment and detachment caused by both World Wars could not be represented in such an idealistic, "soft" aesthetic such as Romanticism. Moreover, the advent of the radio in 1895 caused Modernist writers to be bombarded with an overwhelming sense of isolation, frustration, and helplessness, causing them to reject and move away from the more personal, individual aims of Romanticism, in favor of an intellectual analysis of the world rooted in imagism—a rejection of the self and its importance; an acknowledgment of the world as being in a state of crisis in order to bring about sociopolitical change, something Romanticism did not strong identify with.

Whether or not the Modernists had a particular aim and were successful in that aim is a difficult notion to clearly define. The term itself (as with most any artistic movement) encompasses a wide variety of artistic and philosophical movements from imagism to dadaism and many more. Thus, if the success of a literary movement is dependent on what it aims to do and how successful it is (which we can hesitantly measure by Rukeyser's notion of an emotional response), we would have to come to some conclusion about what the primary aim of Modernism was, which seems folly considering it is comprised of a wide variety of individuals who had different goals and purposes, just as art is today.

Of course, there are always exceptions (and they are that for a reason), but if we do say Modernism had two primary goals—one artistically driven, the other sociopolitical—I believe it did fail; not because it failed to create something artistically new, but rather because it set out to and failed in changing the course of political and

cultural discord caused by the Industrial Revolution, and in turn the resulting annihilation of life caused by World War I and II, and wars thereafter. In fact, if most art within the past century or so has been an anxiety over and rejection of mass-violence and injustices, then so far we have been fighting a losing battle. We may have been heard, but we have not been listened to.

We have a responsibility to ask ourselves if Modernism, or any artistic movement, failed, so that as artists ourselves we can make adjustments in order to maintain relevancy within society. Was Modernism's sociopolitical failure a result of an aesthetic that was too inaccessible to a larger audience and without any personality—too much of art for art's sake? Was it because the sociopolitical ideals and values it held became stripped of meaning in analysis or suppressed by others? Or, perhaps, it was the impossibility of its aim to reject war, to end violence and greed that is innate in humans that can't be eradicated? The question is an open-ended one and impossible to answer, but worth asking because we must come to some conclusion about how art is changing and affecting the world at large, and whether or not it is succeeding. That way, as writers, it is easier for us to imagine how we might change and shift our own aesthetic preferences in order to better meet the needs of society, to better ask and answer ourselves the question—what does the world need to hear from us right now, and in what form, what aesthetic are they most able to listen to and emotionally respond?

For my part, I think Modernism failed for two reasons to do what it set out to do on a universal level, which was to reject war and change the course of society so we could live more peacefully, absolving ourselves of the ego and a conception of self in order to do what is better for the world rather than ourselves.

The first reason that Modernism might have failed is perhaps we do not need to rid ourselves of our imagination and self-worth, but to embrace it. In many ways, Modernism alienated itself because it was a rejection of the self—if war was what we were, we wanted nothing to do with ourselves. The world was emptied of anything that had to do with the human spirit, and instead artists tried to rationalize these violent atrocities through a more objective, scientific view, that the horrors might be better explained. Robert Bly, in his essay "A Wrong Turning in American Poetry," (1963) argues that Modernist and contemporary American poetry lacks in spirituality and "inwardness" as a symptom of taking Eliot's objective correlative too militantly. Therefore, Bly claims, American poetry is absent of the same imagination its foreign counterparts posses due to a strict materialistic, objective approach. In doing so, Bly concludes the *Cantos* "As a poem, annexes other people's ideas, facts, and other languages. . . . The personality of the poet is driven out of the poem" (*Claims for Poetry* 19). Furthermore, Bly draws a distinction between the words "object" and "image," arguing that the "object" is the focus of Modernism, whereas an image—which he claims is more successful—is "the natural speech of the imagination [which] cannot be drawn from or inserted back into the real world" *(Claims for Poetry* 26*).* Muriel Rukeyser expresses a similar sentiment championing the imagination, fearing that Modernist poetry had alienated readers for three reasons: they don't have the time to work through dense literature, they fear poems as a result of having to over-analyze, or because they believe they are unable to understand it (*Life of Poetry* 10).

The second reason Modernism failed is that it is like any other artistic movement—it is art. Art does not cause change fast enough; or, rather, art is seen as a

response and reflection as opposed to a request. As a movement, Modernism did not ask enough of its readers or its artists outside the artistic community. Rukeyser points out how slowly other disciplines react to the emotional truth of literature:

> "There has been a failure between poetry and its people—its writers and audience. . . . There is the universe of poetry and the universe of non-poetry. . . . It is not alone that we have failed poetry. Poetry has failed us too. It has not been good enough. We want this voice now, we want voices to speak to us as we move directly, insisting on full consciousness. What truth does this lead to, at its best? The universe of poetry is the universe of emotional truth. Our material is the way we feel and the way we remember. . . . But here the artist has often set the problem. In tracing the connection between art and science, we see that the flow is as often from art as toward it. Proust is one of the pioneers of the memory, and his problem is only now beginning to be taken up by the psychiatrists and the mathematicians" (*Life of Poetry* 23-24).

While I firmly believe that creative literature must not be confused with rhetoric due to the risk of alienating an audience through a presumptuous world view, we are constantly at risk of trivializing ourselves due to the speed of the medium through which we have chosen to express ourselves. One might argue that Modernism is only now taking affect, and actually succeeding in helping us to contextualize and address contemporary sociopolitical issues of a similar nature they tried to address as a movement. The problem is that the issues we face now as a society, especially concerning the treatment of the environment, do not have that kind of time. Literature takes months, sometimes years to write, publish, to be read and talked about. Yet, it now asks us to change our lives in a contemporary world preoccupied with Netflix at the click of a remote, dwindling natural resources, media that sensationalizes tragedy, killers, war, famine. So how do we as

artists change so that we can have a more immediate, actualized effect? An immediate realization and clear political change as a result of an emotional truth?

One option may be to increase the rate at which we produce and publish our work via technology, something I ironically reject in my work (as I think it's sometimes part of the problem). Moreover, even if the message of literature is sent and received at a faster rate, does that really cause actual change? We must acknowledge what art is good for—starting a conversation. Rukeyser herself concedes:

> "Poetry will not answer these needs. It is art: it imagines and makes, and gives you the imaginings. Because you have imagined love, you have not loved, merely because you have imagined brotherhood, you have not made brotherhood. You may feel as though you had, but you have not. You are going to have to use that imagining as you best can, by building it into yourself, or you will be left with nothing but illusion. Art is action, but it does not cause action: rather, it prepares us for thought. . . . It is not a means to an end, unless that end is the total imaginative experience. That experience will have meaning. It will apply to your life; and it is more than likely to lead you to thought or action, that is, you are likely to want to go further into the world, further into yourself, toward experience" (*Life of Poetry* 25-26).

Here, she is saying one must think before one acts, but there needs to be more. Talking about individual and worldly problems is an aesthetically pleasing way, such as one might accuse the Modernists of, is not enough—we must ask of ourselves and of our readers to take action as a result of the conversation. Therefore, my aesthetic preferences, though always amoebic, are a response to how I think poetry and literature needs to respond to our world in a moment of crisis—this is how reading has informed my own work.

I admit that to examine Modernism as I have, and to concern oneself with particular constructs or a particular facet of poetics, is silly. Constructs are created by humans in order to organize and compartmentalize what otherwise would each be its own unique individual thought, process, and product. I am against claiming whether Modernism (or any other literary or artistic movement otherwise), failed or succeeded, but I do so only because we must expect more of ourselves. Individuals within every moment have both failed and succeeded and different things, more often that not due to events and interpretations that were out of their control. Hell, even Melville was almost forgotten toward the end of his career. Sometimes, the dice just fall.

That's what I think about my own work, my own writing. All I can do is continue to write. All I can continue to do is play guess-work and learn as much as I can and hope that I will do the world justice in my work—that at the right time, the right opportunity, I might be lucky enough to say something that needs to be said. After all, it's important—

> "What we write has consequence; within itself each word must be consequence of those before it, crucial, the onslaught orchestrated, and what we write must have consequence upon ourselves as we write it, as joy, as discovery, as growth in consciousness and the making bigger of the world. The consequence of poetry is in its realization of liberty, and its connection to the fundamental human drama, that country-and-western song. It has no debt. Its relation to the past is the desire to know more and more deeply the enormous number of poets who have gotten to the party previously, whom we have so much to learn from, to love and defy" (Young, *The Art of Recklessness* 165).

I am a firm believer that the best way to learn writing is by reading and finding what you like. One of my first major influences as a poet was Matthew Dickman. What I appreciated about his work was that at a personal time of crisis in my life, his voice

distinguished itself with a contemporary, “Whitmanesque” optimism I found refreshing of my world view when I needed it most. Moreover, I found Dickman's poetry accessible—it was easy to pick up and walk away from without worrying about whether “I got it.” There was an emotional, resonate truth to these poems I felt I connected to at a personal level, an emotional truth of poetry that Rukeyser often mentions. His poems asked me to change my life—and I did. At the same time, poetically, I was searching for a way to make the “I” more universal—for a way out of my selfish poetry, but not necessarily erase myself, the poet, from the work. Many have criticized Dickman's work for being all about himself, and I get it—to some degree, it is about the “I.” But, it's about the relationship of the “I” to the universal, too, channeled through self-experience and emotion. Dickman's book *All-American Poem* helped provide me with a way to frame my poetry and philosophies on life by introducing me to a kind of poetry I hadn't necessarily been exposed to before—American poetry not absent of the “I.”

One particular poem that exemplifies the marriage of the “I” and the universal is his poem “Trouble” (*All-American Poem* 56). What is effective about this poem in connecting the self with the universal is the fact that it takes the universal and applies it to the individual. Dickman does so by beginning the poem with a list of famous celebrities, historical figures, and relatives of their's who have committed suicide. He juxtaposes these with images of the way they killed themselves, writing “Marilyn Monroe took all her sleeping pills/ to bed when she was thirty-six and Marlon Brando’s daughter/ hung in the Tahitian living room/ of her mother’s house/ while Stanley Adams shot himself in the head” (“Trouble” 5-6). He then interrupts the momentum he's built by listing historical deaths, bringing in a particular voice—the “I”—which asserts “Sometimes/ you can look

at the clouds or the trees/ and they look nothing like clouds or trees or the sky or the ground," (5-7). He repeats this cycle of listing fact and individual interruption a few times in order to build and stop the momentum of the poem before arriving at the conclusion:

Larry Walters became famous
for flying in a Sears patio chair and forty-five helium-filled
weather balloons. He reached an altitude of 16,000 feet
and then he landed. He was a man who flew.
He shot himself in the heart. In the morning I get out of bed, I brush
my teeth, I wash my face, I get dressed in the clothes I like best.
I want to be good to myself. ("Trouble" 40-46)

The "I" interrupts "universal lines" of the poem which recount these famous suicides by disrupting the momentum of the poem with personal, random anecdote, such as lines 5-7. In doing so, Dickman provides a cathartic break for the reader and also keeps his poem interesting by adopting a philosophy similar that of Hugo's "The Triggering Subject," by "free[ing] himself from the initiating subject" (*The Triggering Town* 4). Bly might also applaud him for acknowledging his "inwardness," producing images that could not necessarily exist in real life but can be visualized. Most importantly, Dickman's poems ask the reader to respond emotional by engaging head-on with the crisis of suicide and depression—a crisis that has manifested itself as a larger, problematic issue in more recent years as society continues to place more pressure on individuals to succeed. Most everyone I know, including myself, has dealt with depression at some point, and yet

mental health is often an ignored subject—we have a tendency to act as if such ailments don't exist, or if they do, they should not be spoken of openly. By framing the subject of depression and suicide through the scope of poetry, and allowing the poem to exist on both a universal level that keeps it from seeming selfish or melodramatic, Dickman bridges the gap between the large issue and the personal, opening up an opportunity for a conversation about suicide and depression to happen when it is sorely needed in our culture. In his own right, he has responded to society in a time of crisis.

In *The Tibetan Book of the Living and Dying* by Sogyal Rinpoche, he often discusses the anxiety people feel in Western culture that manifests as a result of neglecting and rejecting death as something that will happen to everyone. He writes, "For all its technological achievements, modern Western society has no real understanding of death or what happens in death or after death" (7). As a result, Rinpoche suggests that "modern people have developed no long-term vision, so there is nothing to restrain them from plundering the planet for their own immediate ends and from living in a selfish way that could prove fatal for the future" (8). What is so enlightening about this connection is how my meditations on death in my own work carry a more universal truth—in other words, I think my willingness to confront death in my own work will hopefully help to make others realize the importance of that transitional state, and how by ignoring and neglecting it, we become short-sighted as a society, unconcerned with the well-being of the world-at-large.

Something I admire about the tradition of poetry and literature is the community's willingness to address the more distressing truths of life—one example, which we've just

seen, being Matthew Dickman's “Trouble.” Another poem that deals with the inevitability of death well is James Tate's “Epithalamion for Tyler:”

I thought I knew something
about loneliness but
you go to the stockyards

buy a pig's ear and sew
it on your couch. That, you
said, is my best friend - we

have spirited talks. Even
then I thought: a man of
such exquisite emptiness

(and you cultivated it so)
is ground for fine flowers. (*Selected Poems* 8)

By drawing on the literary tradition of the Epithalamium, Tate draws a connection between marriage and loneliness. Opening the poem with the intriguing image of this lonely man who goes to the stockyards for a pig's ear, he uses the image as a vehicle to transport the sentiment of loneliness in an imaginative, fresh way. Then, Tate equates loneliness with what he says is “exquisite emptiness,” suggesting in a rather romanticized way that loneliness is beautiful. Nonetheless, he surprises readers with a turn at the end of

the poem, introducing a new image to complicate what he has written so far, concluding: “Even/ then I thought: a man of/ such exquisite emptiness/ (and you cultivated it so)/ is ground for fine flowers.” In doing so, Tate implies that whether we are lonely or married, it is irrelevant, as death comes for us all. What a liberating way to approach relationship problems! How cathartic, to suggest that our personal attachments do not save us from the final equalizer of death.

In bringing this issue to the reader's attention, Tate, like many other poets in the literary tradition, help to make us aware of the importance of death and its consequences. By meditating on death and suggesting that our feelings and relationships have nothing to do with its ultimate arrival, he suggests to his audience that what we often see as negative emotions, such as loneliness, are actually fleeting and short lived—inconsequential in the larger scheme of nature.

The meditations on death in my work, tied with my interest in ecopoetics and social issues, help me to cultivate a framework through which to speak to universal problems everyone must face. Because of my personal belief that many problems in Western culture stem from a rejection of death, I think it is an important issue to raise in context with how death relates to the way we approach our daily lives. Our current philosophy on death as a culture causes negative consequences based on our immediate actions without consideration for the future. In working to bring the conversation of death to the table, if I can make a clear correlation in my work as to how that affects our problematic attitudes toward the environment, I think it would be a powerful move in my poetry.

We must both be socially conscious and socially unaware when writing a poem. What I mean by that is, when writing, I try to free myself of constructs. I believe Dean Young's advice: “When we feel disappointed with a poem, with our effort. . . it's because it seems to fall short of our intentions. But those intentions are often vague and speculative. . . . The nagging sense of failure may not be that a poem falls short but that the forms of intention are themselves at fault, producing a too-ready verdict of failure. . . Prescription and intention are traps” (*The Art of Recklessness* 3-4). A poem of mine that I feel reflects similar aesthetic choices to both “Trouble” and “Epithalamion,” (though it is certainly different from both, too) is included below:

My mind has been tired lately

due to dynamite explosions
for silver, gold—the cave's mouth
collapsing on its broken jaw.

My mind has been tired due

to jalapeno poppers in the oven
far off in a country somewhere
overseas on the blue pixel screen.

Sometime,

wouldn't you like to go to the movies with me?
Watch cats sit all day
broken, in blinds, on a windowsill?

As they observe birds race by,
they don't have to imagine the heartbeat
of one that suddenly falls silent.

What I've tried to do in “My mind” is take an emotion I was feeling that day, and use it as a triggering subject. Beginning with the dynamite explosions, I at first was thinking of how tired of noise I was, and allowed the sound of dynamite to embody that idea. Then, I applied images in what I thought was a musical way that attached a universal notion to the poem. Of course, when I wrote this, I had no idea what I was aiming to do, but in retrospect that seems to me what it was—I followed Hugo's advice to “Depend on rhythm, tonality, and the music of language to hold things together. It is impossible to write meaningless sequences. In a sense the next thing always belongs. In the world of imagination, all things belong” (Hugo, *The Triggering Town* 4-5). I take a turn in the poem, returning to the “I,” and repeat the phrase of exhaustion in order to draw out the sentiment of exhaustion, and bring it to what I think is a surprisingly more personal image by going smaller—the jalapeno poppers. The idea of “popping” led me to war, and the way I describe the TV screen brought my mind to the movies. I have no justification for the cats other than there are a bunch in other apartments by my own looking out the window wanting to see a bird fly by all the time. To them, nothing is better than

dreaming of chasing that damn thing and preserving their natural instincts. Thus, I drew a connection between the idea of cats hunting birds and humans hunting humans by tying a personal experience I perceived in order to complicate the image of war without sounding rhetorical or having a notion of preconceived truth. Moreover, much like in Tate's "Epithalamion for Tyler," I make a similar move toward death at the end by using the image to carry a sentiment that could otherwise be trite.

The power of the image works because it allows the audience to make up their own mind about what they've read. The image does not tell a reader to do anything but imagine a scene where they are afforded the opportunity to make up their own mind about what they've read on the page. As I mentioned earlier, I often am concerned and cautious about how I write on social issues—I am consistently concerned about overstepping my boundaries and unintentionally speaking for others. One solution we can look to solve this problem is acting as a "poet-as-witness" during times of crisis, as opposed to trying to speak for others. As an objective viewpoint, the image affords that opportunity, and allows me as a writer to engage in important social issues where "I," as a poet, have not experienced the issue firsthand.

A good example of a "poet-as-witness" is Muriel Rukeyser's *Book of the Dead*—a collection that discusses the Gauley Bridge mine tragedy in West Virginia which happened at the beginning of the 1930's. In the collection, Rukeyser exposes the unjust treatment of both workers and nature by Union Carbide, the company in charge of the mining project. Most of the workers were African-American, and due to poor working conditions (so the company could save money), as well as being severely underpaid,

many workers contracted silicosis and died—a fact Union Carbide tried to cover up by hiring people to bury the bodies. Rukeyser utilizes poetry, journalism, non-fiction techniques, and first-person narrative account in order to create a documentary by acting through a metaphorical "camera," or as a "poet of witness." Additionally, Rukeyser records and includes official court documents, transcripts, and charts in order to create a well-rounded, interdisciplinary, objective report of the disaster.

I think the idea of an interdisciplinary ties in with my earlier concern over how to open up poetry to a wider audience more immediately, and answers how we can write literature that asks of the audience an emotional response while still avoiding the trap of over-sentimentality or coming off as partial to a particular view. Rukeyser uses other disciplines in addition to poetry in order to portray her objective view point and bring light to the abuses of Union Carbide . She herself was highly interested in the idea of being well-rounded through interdisciplinary studies, as Anne Herzog mentions, saying "Rukeyser refused to work with what she called "unrelated elements": her poetry attempts to provide a simulacrum of lived experience by refusing to separate poetry from biological, scientific, social, economic, political, and environmental processes—from anything that impinges upon actual live life of humans in their historical moment." What interdisciplinary subject matter allows is a way to build fact side-by-side with the emotional commentary and aim of poetry. Moreover, it is a way for others outside of the artistic community to relate to what is being said.

In speaking to Rukeyser's use of other literature, especially the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, a quote by Robert Pinsky comes to mind in his book *The Situation of Poetry*, where he sets forth a notion arguing a "mere similarity with the past does not necessarily

indicate a living relationship with it; the outer husk may persist without the spirit, or only the spirit of ornament" (Pinsky 7). What is so successful about Rukeyser's *Book of the Dead*, and something important to me in my own work, is how familiar and educated she is with the sources she draws from—not only the first person accounts of the tragedy, but also the *Egyptian Book of the Dead.* If we appropriate, as Pinsky suggests, we must not just appropriate stylistic mannerisms of a work, but truly come to an understanding of why and for what purposes that piece of art or literature was created. This way, we can speak in our own work directly to the function it served, as opposed to adopting craft decisions that are trivial unless the original meaning is preserved.

Rukeyser has a clear understanding of The Egyptian Book of the Dead, which contained prayers and invocations meant to be spoken at funeral ceremonies over the body of the recently deceased to ensure their acceptance into the celestial Sun Boat of Ra. She uses the original meaning and intention of the Egyptian text in order to not just appropriate, but add an extra layer of meaning to her own book in conversation with the original Book of the Dead. One important source she draws from, as Scigaj points out, is that "The text reveals the Egyptian belief that the primordial entity was water, symbolized bu the god Nu. Ra was born of this water and created all of the remaining elements of earth. At one junction in the text, Ani asserts his purity in ecological terms, as not having tipped the environmental balance by despoiling any of the elements created by Ra on this earth." (135).

Rukeyser uses this relationship between those miners who died of Silicosis and the spiritual prayer involved in the Egyptian Book of the Dead, while also capitalizing on the ecological relationship for her own means in order portray the imbalance in ecology

and justice caused by Union Carbide. Moreover, by titling her own work under the same name as the text she's pulling from, Rukeyser is implying that this record of the Gauley Bridge tragedy is a spiritual incantation, a prayer with a call to action that asks us to remember—if we were to forget, then we would not be doing these marginalized, mistreated minorities and miners justice. Rukeyser herself said, "In our own time, we have becomes used to an idea of history in which process and relationship are stressed. The science of ecology is only one example of an elaboration of the idea, so that the life of land may be seen in terms of its tides of growth , the feeding of one group on another, the equilibrium reached, broken, and the drive toward another balance and renewal" (Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry* 13).

Another author who I think makes a similar move with imagery is W.S. Merwin. As a poet who was, and still is heavily involved in writing both socially conscious and ecopoetic work, I found his poems anything but indicative of rhetoric—he never came off as an author with an agenda, nor sacrificed aesthetic art value in favor of a particular message, yet still successfully portrays one. One particular poem exemplary of the use of image by Merwin is from his collection *The Lice*, in his poem "The Last One," which is about the arrogance and selfishness of mankind regarding our over-abundant use of the environment. The poem details a group of people labeled "they" who have "made up their minds to be everywhere because why not./ Everywhere was theirs because they thought so." While at first the poem seems abstract and it is difficult to attribute a particular group to "they," it becomes clear who "they" are through Merwin's introduction of subtle images in order to establish a setting. By the 3rd stanza, Merwin makes it clear who "they" is, and what "they" are doing, writing, "they cut everything

because why not. . . . there was only one left standing/. . . The night gathered in last branches" (10). Though at first we are unsure of who "they" are, and what they are cutting, Merwin evokes the image of branches in order to help the reader make the connection to trees. Merwin continues the poem by detailing the fact that the shadows left over from what they cut begin to grow and consume everything around them—implying the inevitable consequences of environmental destruction. He ends the poem powerfully, claiming "The ones that were left went away to live if [the shadow] would let them./ They went as far as they could./ The Lucky ones with their shadows" (12).

In comparison to Rukeyser's *Book of the Dead*, what I like about Merwin's *The Lice* and how it deals with ecopoetics and problematic social issues of the Vietnam War, is that it embraces and maintains the "inwardness" that Bly discusses in "A Wrong Turning in American Poetry." Specifically, it utilizes "images" as opposed to "pictures," the latter which Rukeyser largely depends on in her account of Gauley Bridge. In rejecting the strict rules of objectivity as a "poet of witness", Merwin allows a more imaginative experience in the poem, using the shadow as an image as opposed to the picture, bringing a sense of horror and anxiety to "The Last One" that possesses an immediacy of consequence. While Rukeyser's book does certainly hold the immediacy of consequence, and does well at calling attention to that, Merwin's "inwardness" provides an intriguing aesthetic that asks the reader to engage in an imaginative experience Rukeyser's *Book of the Dead* doesn't always call upon, especially in her poems that are documents. Because Merwin lends himself to allowing room for a more metaphorical experience, he draws the reader in by asking them to engage in a world which doesn't yet exist, but hauntingly could. While I respect and admire both books, they both use

different means in order to convey a similar sentiment—that alarming and unacceptable events are happening, and we must act to correct them. Personally, I am inclined toward the more imaginative experience, because I think it provides an audience with a specific kind of catharsis that helps them to address these problematic issues while also simultaneously helping them find relief from reality—literature must both entertain and inform.

An issue I feel comfortable with engaging head-on is ecopoetics, because every person in the world has a stake in the issue—it is something we can all band together and discuss without fear that we might overstep our boundaries. Though we can never know completely how to avoid sentimentality when discussing sensitive cultural and societal issues, to not risk sentimentality, I think, is to risk not asking of your audience an emotional response. As a writer, I am constantly considering my audience, but not when I'm at the page in the process of writing something new. The issue with considering audience when in the process of writing is that it causes your mind to construct intentional meaning which, in-turn, actually inhibits the ability of a poem and its ability to be original, creative, and meaningful. Hugo advises, “Never worry about the reader, what the reader can understand. When you are writing, glance over your shoulder, and you'll find there is no reader. Just you and the page. Feel lonely? Good. Assuming you can write clear English sentences, give up all worry about communication” (Hugo, *The Triggering Town* 5).

Yet at the same time, it is obvious that training in poetics, reading other authors, and working on our writing with intentionality does help to develop our craft and makes

us better writers. More importantly, it allows us to say something that needs to be said with intention. We can't, as writers, dodge the problematic issues of the world with beautiful metaphors and analogies, though we can embed the issues in them in order to portray an idea objectively. Maybe prescription and intention aren't always the pit-fall of a good or bad poet—it depends. I see my writing as possessing two phases: the first is much like Young or Hugo might support—the suspension of all previous conceptions about what a poem should be, how it has to be written, what literary devices must be used and in what order—none of that matters when first drafting a poem. Young says:

> "the necessary wounding that any poet must undergo, is the detachment from her own work. . . .We must cut ourselves out and off to move toward a sophisticated sense of the art beyond our sense of self, to develop a historical sense, to see that we write in dialogue with the poetry of the past, to see poems as things, material to be manipulated. . . . We must risk a loss of passionate connection to distance ourselves from our work, to grow a little cold to it in order to revise, in order to look at a poem as a series of decisions" (Young, *The Art of Recklessness* 161).

I believe you must free yourself from attachment in order to come up with something truly original, artistic, universal, and ultimately interesting—but for the same reason I criticized the Modernists, I call myself out—beautiful language, beautiful writing without intention is not enough anymore. That's why we moved on from Romanticism, why we reconcieve our fuel as poets—since the Industrial Revolution our world has been thrown into a state of crisis. We as writers must change the way we engage in the sociopolitical and cultural conversations occurring right now in the world. In order to maintain both my originality but also achieve a sense of intent and purpose in my work, I've gotten better at

understanding my audience needs more than my well intended rambling—they need editing. We need both the aesthetic of art and the intended message.

Throughout my experiences the past three years, the rub for me was how to improve my craft while also reconciling my personal experiences with the universal. How could "I" speak for more than just myself? Poetry has helped me to become a more mindful human being, making me ask these and other questions of myself and the world I might not have asked otherwise.

I have learned through Pinsky and Young that it is essential to train in the tradition of literature so that we don't simply inherit poetics and aesthetic decisions, but rather understand their original motives behind them. Because I have come to understand some of these literary traditions and have the desire to continue educating myself in them, I am a better writer for it—training in tradition allows you to understand the original function of a particular aesthetic choice, thus allowing a writer to use it to his or her own end in order to meet the emotional needs of oneself and others. Hugo has taught me to contradict myself—to forget all of that—and discover my own truth. What can I say—it keeps my work interesting. From Dickman and Tate, I've found a way to connect my personal experiences with the universal by understanding that my meditations on death are not only cathartic for myself, but they speak to the problems of the world at large by connecting problematic attitudes stemming from the anxiety of death. Rukeyser taught me how to completely forgo my own experiences so that I might write and record an issue that I have no personal stake in, other than human empathy and concern. Her *Book of the Dead* provided me with a way of seeing myself as a "poet as witness" in order to

simultaneously overstep social and cultural boundaries, while bringing light to issues that need to be brought up in conversations where those involved are not always given a chance to speak.

Most importantly, I think I've finally come to realize that art for art's sake is not enough. Reflecting on my writing and reading itself has made me more empathetic to others situations, more socially aware, more imaginative. Developing my writing through these readings has provided me with different tools, methods, and ideas to go about framing my art in the context of the world, and better equipped me with an imagination that facilitates actualized change in my own life. In doing so, it has allowed me to engage in and hopefully begin important conversations that hold weight for not just myself, but the world. In some ways, this may be idealistic, and I admit I don't have it all figured out yet, and probably never will, but to come to this realization—that art needs to be for more than its own sake.

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