POETRY FOUNDATION

PROSE FROM POETRY MAGAZINE

Equipment for Living

Poetry's complex consolations.

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Originally Published: April 01, 2015

"A new thing appears," Annie Dillard writes, "as if we needed a new thing." What are we *doing* with all these films and songs and novels and poems and pictures? Why keep making them? Don't we have enough, or too much?

I find I can't get away from my early reading of Harold Bloom, who proposes that we ask of a text: "what is it good for, what can I do with it, what can it do for me, what can I make it mean?" Things that answer these questions — things that are good for something, that we can do something with, that we can make do things for us, that we can make mean something — we call equipment.

Hammers, for instance, are good for lots of things — building birdhouses, bludgeoning ideological opponents, breaking down and becoming present-at-hand. But a hammer is obviously designed in such a way that certain purposes (driving nails) are more plausible than others. For Kenneth Burke, poetry is designed for living:

> Poetry *is* produced ... as part of the *consolatio philosophiae*. It is undertaken as *equipment for living*, as a ritualistic way of arming us to confront perplexities and risks. It would *protect* us.

I like the notion that the aesthetic is conceived in response to threat. Burke reminds us that implicit in the notion of protection is the idea of something to be *protected against*. Risks and perplexities. The shit that, in the vernacular version, happens.

What Burke does *not* mean by *equipment for living* is conveyed by Kenneth Koch's line: "People say yes everyone is dying / But here read this happy book on the subject." Poetry doesn't kiss the boo-boo and make it all better. Burke suggests that poems be viewed as "strategies for dealing with situations" (he doesn't say this is the only way to view them). The structural defects of our existence require of us strategic thinking. Burke consults some dictionaries and discovers that "strategy" has to do with the movement and directing of armies:

> Surely, the most highly alembicated and sophisticated work of art, arising in complex civilizations, could be considered as designed to organize and command the army of one's thoughts and images, and to so organize them that one "imposes upon the enemy the time and place and conditions for fighting preferred by oneself." One seeks to "direct the larger movements and operations" in one's campaign of living.

Burke rejects the "strategy for easy consolation" found in "popular 'inspirational literature,'" art as uplift, paper armies raised on the cheap. "All the redemption I can offer," Bruce Springsteen admits, "is beneath this dirty hood." In *The Triumph of Love*, Geoffrey Hill asks "what are poems for?", and his answer, borrowed from Leopardi, is not without its self-directed irony:

> They are to console us
> with their own gift, which is like perfect pitch.
> Let us commit that to our dust. What
> ought a poem to be? Answer, *a sad*
> *and angry consolation.* What is
> the poem? What figures? Say,
> *a sad and angry consolation.* That's
> beautiful. Once more? *A sad and angry*
> *consolation.*

The repetition of Leopardi's phrase forms a call-and-response, with the emphasis shifting as each adjective ends a line in turn. But as if to underscore the unromantic tenor of Hill's vision, the exchange is hardly "Can I get an amen?" or "Somebody in the house say *hell yeah*!" No one's likely to get too fired up over "Once more?" "*A sad and angry consolation.*"

But the words return, a refrain, as a trauma is repeated in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, and we are to commit them to the dust unto which, Genesis tells us, we shall return (the dirty hood of the grave). The mantra-like repetition of *a sad and angry consolation* makes the words seem less clear, more in need of interpretation. The question that forces itself is, of course, how something consoling can be sad and angry, or how sorrow and anger can console, when they would seem to be precisely the affects whose sufferers stand in need of consolation.

Boethius would have understood: he composed *De Consolatione Philosophiae* in prison, awaiting execution. According to one reputable source, "a cord was twisted round his head so tightly that it caused his eyeballs to protrude from their sockets, and ... his life was then beaten out of him by a club." Lady Philosophy does not console the prisoner by freeing him or providing him with worldly goods or happiness, but by reconciling him to his fate. He comes to accept that all things are ordered sweetly by God, and he aspires to achieve spiritual freedom through contemplation of God. (Actual redemption is implied, but not easy consolation.)

Nietzsche saw art, and Lady Philosophy, as a benign illusion that sustains us in the face of the awful truth, which would cause our eyeballs to protrude from their sockets. My understanding of poetry's consolatory powers has more in common with the concept of psychoanalysis as a way of fortifying the self through the acceptance of perpetual unrest. Our wills and fates do so contrary run that even our wills are not under our control. I wouldn't be the first to see psychoanalysis in this sense as a trope for poetry (or vice versa). In Adam Phillips's psychoanalytical version of Bloom's pragmatism, a text answers the question "what can it get you out of?" One thing it can get you out of is the false hope that you can escape unrest.

"No one here gets out alive" is the *best case scenario*. Consolation is not false comfort. Poetry's a prophylactic, not a vaccine. One way poetry helps you to accept perpetual unrest, to arm yourself to confront perplexities, is by reminding you that you're not alone (a not coincidentally common refrain in popular song). This just in: everyone you love will be extinguished, and so will you. But this can be said of every person in the universe. You're not special. Men and women have been living and dying for a long time, and some of them have left records. Those records won't eliminate your fears; they might help you to live with them. They might help you raise an army.

It isn't only at the level of subject (what's often miscalled "content") that poetry operates as equipment for living. "Every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" teaches us that we are involved in mankind, but so does "Oh! Look what you've done to this rock 'n' roll clow-ow-own." Yes, I assume that what Burke says about poetry applies, mutatis mutandis, to the songs of Def Leppard, though they are hardly alembicated at all. My justification for doing so is formal. Both poems and pop songs provide what Burke calls "structural assertion": "form, a public matter that symbolically enrolls us with allies who will share the burdens with us."

Which means what, exactly? Form's notoriously hard to define. *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*: "The *OED* gives 22 definitions, with subcategory refinements and variations." The traditional distinction between "form" and "content" doesn't hold for a variety of reasons. Form shapes meaning, so meaning shifts when form does — in Peter McDonald's phrase, form "is the pressing reality according to which metaphors and meaning must make their way." The relationship of form and content is more like that of space and time than that of vessel and water. For my purposes, "form" means something like: those features that make a given verbal act shareable. As Burke notes, "Language, of all things, is most public, most collective, in its substance." There's no such thing as a private language; language is a social fact. So is, because of its conditions of production and consumption, pop music. A pop song is a *popular* song, one that some ideal "everybody" knows or could know. Its form lends itself to communal participation. Or, stronger, it depends upon the possibility of communal participation for its full effect. Burke's phrase "structural assertion" is a neat way of recognizing that form is involved in any artifact — the tax code, for instance — but that the structure of some artifacts (poems, pop songs) asserts itself more strongly, stakes its claim on our attention more enticingly, and thereby possesses a greater degree of shareability.

Form grounds us in a community, however attenuated or virtual. My friend Jen writes that, on a summer night in Brooklyn outside a club, "Rose and I were singing 'We Can't Stop' to each other. She would sing the *la da dee da dee* parts and I would sing *this is our house, this is our rules*. It's a beautiful song." Jen and Rose are already allies, but, sharing some words and a melody (Miley Cyrus's, in this case), they take their place symbolically among others who know the song, who sing along. A passerby might join in for a few bars, exchanging smiles

with these strangers who are linked to him, however briefly, through the public matter of form: an occasion for artifactual embrace. It's magic (just a little bit of magic).

This is why the bus scene in Cameron Crowe's otherwise risible movie *Almost Famous* is so powerful. Everyone on the tour bus — the band, the groupies, the rock critic — is pissed off at everybody else for various reasons. Everyone's got that stuck-in-a-confined-space-with-people-I-want-to-kill stare. Elton John's "Tiny Dancer" comes on the bus stereo, and for a while the band members continue to glower, but finally the bassist starts singing along: "Handing tickets out for *Gah*-awd." Kate Hudson joins in on the next line — "Turning back, she just laughs" — and most of the bus is smiling and singing by the time Elton gets to "The boulevard is not that bad." It's corny, but it's true: everyone knows the lines by heart, everyone throws their head back and closes their eyes and belts out the chorus:

> Hold me closer, tiny dancer
> Count the headlights on the highway
> Lay me down in sheets of linen
> You had a busy day today.

It works, I want to say, for the same reason the Kaddish or the Mass works: it conveys comfort because it is a shared experience, one that reinforces a sense of community, of "allies who will share the burdens with us." The entire congregation's voices are lifted in unison, in supplication, in awe — the form is universal, known to all.

One church might be distinguished from others by its forms. The televangelical *JAY*-zus, the sober Jesu Christe of the Latin Mass, the radical Jewish peasant Yeshua of Nazareth of Guy Davenport's translations, and the *Gee-zuhhs* Norman Greenbaum's "gotta have a friend in" are not the same sort of equipment. The difference between the Eucharist and "Tiny Dancer" is the difference between *God* and *Gah-awd*, between an abstract principle of general transcendence and a practical occasion for transcendence as a shareable idiosyncrasy. It is *Gah-awd* (rather than *God*) that recruits community into the world specified by the "content" — in which the boulevard is not that bad.

"Tiny Dancer," on that bus, is a spell, an incantation, but a public one, one that also connects the particular congregation to the thousands of like-minded others at diverse sites across the globe. Often the votary will be found in a church of one, singing along with the radio in her bedroom. She belongs to the broader church no less than the desert hermit at prayer among his rocks; the forms link her to it. The words she knows, the tune she hums.

Of course, popular music is democratic in a way poetry's not and probably can't be (even if the reduction of Whitman to a democratic bonhommie helps to sell some jeans). "Public" does not equal "everyone." *The Cantos*, for instance, in their magpie hoarding of borrowed song, stage or perform a shareable idiosyncrasy of culture whose elitist ethos does not preclude the expansion of that public, even as that public will lamentably remain foreclosed by accidents of class and education. (What must be democratized is the means of access to art, not art.) In his great essay on Emerson, "Alienated Majesty," Geoffrey Hill mocks the trite notion that poetry's "place is to be supportive of self-improvement and broad ideas of social progress." Do I need to say that by "equipment for living" I do not mean "equipment for self-improvement"?

Frank O'Hara acknowledges the use he makes of poetry by identifying it with his literal equipment for living: "My heart is in my / pocket, it is Poems by Pierre Reverdy." But most people don't seem to need poetry, and, you know, bully for them. Men die miserably every day for lack of clean drinking water and affordable health care, not of what's found in poems. And poetry, alas, can't do a damned thing against capitalism, even as it devotes its intellectual and affective energies to it in a dialectical dance of opposition and complicity. As Joshua Clover says about our claims — whether total or qualified — for "the political force of poetry": "It's such bullshit, isn't it?" Pop is even worse off, a watermarked wing of consumer capitalism structurally restricted to dreams of utopia.

But I take it that our having to ask ourselves what poems and pop songs are for, and our compulsion to suggest answers, is a good thing — that it's the fields that are certain of their purpose and their standing that lend themselves most to reified thinking. I mean principally the natural sciences, which shade now so easily into the most preposterous scientism. Evolutionary psychologists will tell you that the arts exist to — well, there's only one reason any human endeavor exists, according to evolutionary psychology. Phillips suggests that it's worth asking what poetry's good for because science is always providing answers to the question of what science is good for —

vaccines, Google, drone strikes, showrooms filled with fabulous prizes. And for Phillips, poetry — and pop, I'd add — provides a "cure for our pervasive skepticism about whether language works." Whether, that is, the right words can, as psychoanalysis teaches, make us better off.

Phillips's revision of Bloom, then, I might paraphrase as "What can the right language set to music get you out of?" I've no doubt left much undertheorized in this discussion — not least the distinctions between poetry and pop as equipment for living (I've barely intimated the no-duh role music without words plays in pop). But I hear Bob Dylan wonder "what price / you have to pay to get out of / going through all these things twice." Which is to say, to get out of the compulsion to repeat, which is to say to get out of the death drive (which Phillips glosses as Freud's way of saying, "we want to die, and whether or not we want to we will"). Dylan knows there's no getting out of it at any price, and his song provides in some measure a sad and angry consolation for this reality. In its strains, as in Freud's and Phillips's and Hill's, I hear the imperative: *get out of wanting to get out of it*.

And since it would be a cliche to end an essay on poetry and pop music with a Dylan quote, let me cite the words of Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil, made famous by The Animals during the Vietnam War: "We gotta get out of this place / if it's the last thing we ever do." Which it will be. But the boulevard is not that bad.

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