

What Are Poets For During a Difficult Time?

When Jerry Mirskin asked me to participate in a panel entitled “What are poets for during a difficult time,” I assumed the gathering was in some response to the enormous public catastrophe of September 11. I thought first of how poets in the past have grappled with issues which collectively touch the lives of a community, a country, or the world: Auden’s response to the outbreak of World War II, Seamus Heaney’s response to the violence in Northern Ireland, or, closer to home, Robert Lowell’s “For the Union Dead,” one of the great political elegies of the 20th century. Lowell’s poem, one that touches on issues ranging from the Civil War to contemporary racism, is a powerful amalgamation of the personal and the political, a mediation on American history and Lowell’s own life. In it one witnesses the moral innocence of a child being replaced by the moral anguish of an adult coming to terms with both his own and his country’s shortcomings.

Steven Alexrod has said about Lowell’s poem and poems like it, “The poet as historian aims neither to retrieve data nor to provide a rationale for a political program, but rather to give us essential knowledge of ourselves.” It’s the second part of that quote that I think is very helpful: the poet gives us essential knowledge of ourselves, and I think I would apply it to the topic of tonight’s discussion, even if it seems to move us away from the public or political and head us off in a different direction entirely. The poet during a difficult time aims neither to provide momentary consolation nor even to explain or rationalize the cause of the difficulty, but to give us essential knowledge of ourselves.

As an illustration of what that might entail, I’d like to speak for a few minutes about an Emily Dickinson poem addressing a difficult time--the time following a traumatic loss. It’s not a poem about a political or an historical event; in fact, it’s not a public poem at all. Like most of Dickinson’s poems, it explores the private and the interior. It’s 13 lines long, so I’ll read it.

After great pain, a formal feeling comes—
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs—
The stiff Heart questions was it He, that bore,
And Yesterday, or Centuries before?

The Feet, mechanical, go round—
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought—
A Wooden Way
Regardless grown,
A Quartz contentment, like a stone—

This is the Hour of Lead—
Remembered, if outlived,
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow—
First—Chill—then Stupor—then the letting go—

She never says what the great pain is. We know so little of Emily Dickinson's life that we can only speculate what might have prompted this intense, focused spasm of grief. Dickinson lived as a recluse in her family house for most of her adult life, and, at her direction, her sister Lavinia burned all her correspondence when she died. We do have her poems, though, and they reveal an intense, interior life. Given the all funereal images, many readers sense that the poem records the aftershock of a loved one's death, and that the entire poem is an elegy. Like a traditional elegy it seems to describe, to absorb, and finally to release the grief, with the trajectory of the poem moving from the opening "great pain" to the final "letting go." As with a number of Dickinson poems, she reaches for paradox and apparent contradiction to express extreme psychological states.

Like Keats at the opening of the Nightingale Ode, who says "My heart aches and a drowsy numbness pains my sense," Dickinson or her stand-in says the strange difficult state she is in is a "formal feeling." Just as one wonders in Keats's poem how a numbness can pain, so too in Dickinson's poem the terms "feeling" and "formal" seem opposed, in conflict with one another. How can something as freely spontaneous as feeling be confined in a formal setting. On another level, of course, that phrase can provide a working definition of any poem, which uses words, the formal abstractions of language, to shape and contain human emotion. Even though we never find out what the great pain is, we do see through the imagery that the emotional aftershock which follows this pain places her in a zombie-like state. Moreover, there is no "I" in this narrative; the Self, shattered into "Nerves" and "Heart" and "Feet," is as fragmented as the syntax of the poem. The feeling is formal; the heart is stiff; the nerves are ceremonious. Like a wind-up doll, her feet move mechanically, but the preposition at the start of the next line purposefully disorients: "The feet, mechanical, go round/ *Of* Ground, or Air, or Aught." Is this person walking on the ground, floating through the air, or somehow levitating through some strange medium of "Aught"--a zero-ness incapable of spacial location?

These figures of brittle rigidity and disorientation lead to the central perplexing image of the poem: "A Quartz contentment, like a stone." "Quartz contentment" sits right up next to "formal feeling" in terms of apparent contradiction, only it pushes the paradox further. It's an image which suggests that the heart has turned to glass, and that light passing through this translucent prism will refract and scatter a spectrum of emotions, in which contentment and despair are indistinguishable, all with the self, whatever self is left in the wake of this shattering, unmoved and arrested in the deep aftershock of grief. If the heart has turned to crystal, it has also turned into a headstone, a mute witness to the markings of the enormous unnamed pain.

Up to this point Dickinson's poem does not tell us, but very powerfully *shows* us grief. This ability to think and persuade in terms of images is what distinguishes Dickinson from the ordinary poets of the nineteenth century. But she doesn't stop there; she goes one step further to tell us something we need to know. What makes this poem valuable is Dickinson's understanding that a loss of this magnitude can never really be let go. This Hour of Lead, this difficult time, may cost you your life, but it will take your entire life to realize this. If you can get through this extreme state, you will remember it

as a sequence and a descent into the abyss, or, as she says, you will remember it the way people freezing to death will remember the snow, in three stages. First the sensation or shock--the Chill; then the sensationlessness, the numbness and emotional glass-like clarity--the Stupor; and then the letting go. But in this sequence of images a person is letting go of life and consciousness as he or she succumbs to the numbness. In terms of the immediate narrative, the freezing person lets go of life; in terms of the poem's larger trajectory, the grieving speaker lets go of the pain. The letting go of the pain and the letting of life are fused in the ultimate oxymoron of the poem. Unlike traditional elegies which attempt at poem's end to restore or affirm a sense of life and continuity, Dickinson poses a deeper and truer insight: you don't outlive great pain, you can't; you live *with* it. You can never go back to business as usual, to life as it was lived before the great pain. Poets show us first what it is to experience great pain, then what that experience entails, and then--and this is what poets are for in a difficult time-- how to live in and with the full knowledge of what has happened.

I thought I would end by reading a poem I wrote during a difficult time, one that touches another troubled time in our history. It was the year of the bicentennial, shortly after the Vietnam War had ended, and the country, in an effort to throw off the trauma and anguish of that war, had taken to lavish displays of patriotism and national affirmation. It was also the year that my brother died, and somehow the public and the private seemed to comment on each other. I should say for those of you who are not inveterate poker players that the title of the poem refers to the hand that Wild Bill Hicock was holding the night he was shot in the back of the head. He was playing poker at a saloon in Deadwood, South Dakota, in 1876, the year of the centennial. It's been known as the Death Hand in poker ever since.

Aces and Eights

I can't remember when it was we stopped
talking. I know I didn't think of you
this way until much later, the day
I went to collect your clothes. By then
your wife and kids had already left you,
and you, you were an empty apartment filled
with furniture torn from the Sunday *Times*.
When I opened the closet, your life spilled out:
shirts and ties with silver monograms,
coats of cashmere, wool, and silk,
patent leather shoes buckled with gold plate;
everything you would ever need
for the office or the cruise.

In the fifteen years you took to wind

this costly sheet, I think you knew.
When they cut your stomach out, I knew
you knew. But the glow at the meridian's lip
was better by far than its dark, pointless center.
So you steered out against the odds,
against the evidence, as the emptiness you turned
away from ate outward toward your clothes.
I gave them to the priest.

That was two days after we buried you.
It's now twelve years, and more than thirty
since Father died. We put you on top
of each other, which even now seems right.
Back then, you begged him, or God, for light
but only found night after night the latticed shadow
of your childish fists clenched in prayer.
Still, you carried it like a dark candle
cupped within your brilliant sleights of hand:
that empty palm was your truth, the cards,
as you might have said, that were dealt.

That year was the bicentennial. For no reason
everyone began a public celebration.
Soldiers, ending their long shame, once again
marched the street with flags and guns;
old ships sailed in and out of the harbor;
and you, having slipped the moorings
of your thirty-six years became a wake,
a slight tremor on the bright, reflecting water,
that, then and now, trails across my mirror.

for my brother, 1940-1976

Kevin Murphy
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