WHY POETRY

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

"I HAVE A CONFESSION TO MAKE: I DON'T REALLY UNDERSTAND poetry." For over twenty-five years, I have heard this said, over and over in slightly different ways, by strangers I met in bars and at dinner parties, on planes—so everyone who found out I was a poet. Clearly, there is something wrong. Maybe the problem is with them as readers. Maybe they don't know enough or haven't studied enough or weren't paying attention in school. Or maybe the problem is with poetry itself. Why don't poets just say what they mean? Why do they make it so hard?

Around ten years ago, I had published two books of poetry and was traveling extensively around the United States and parts of Europe giving readings. I was also teaching poetry at a variety of colleges and universities, to a wide range of students. I kept hearing some version of that confession. And I kept having the same sorts of conversations, in which I would attempt to explain, stumblingly, what I believed about poetry, how I thought it made meaning, why I thought it was not difficult in the ways that we had been taught in school.

Later, I would each time always wish I had said it all differently, more gracefully, more completely. So, I thought, I will write a book. In it, I would explore what it is about poetry that makes people feel that they don't understand it. I would take seriously the objections people have, and try to address those objections clearly and simply, in order to explore what poetry is, and why, despite its supposed difficulties and obscurities, so many people still write and read it.

I was immediately excited about this big, impossible plan. I knew the main idea would be that poetry does something different than all other forms of writing and speech, something essential, something we need.

I would demonstrate this by writing about old poems, and also contemporary ones. I would discuss the mechanisms of poems: form, and rhyme, and metaphor, and symbols. I would reveal that what is strange about poetry—its dream logic, its interest in the slipperiness and material qualities of language, its associative daydreaming movement—is not some deliberate obfuscation, or an obstacle to communication, but essential to the very way poetry makes meaning.

Also, I would write about how the increasing [illegible] of connective technology has made the contemplative, speculative [illegible] tive awareness poetry can bring ever more rare and necessary. I would write about how poetry can move us closer to what is vital and elusive, what can never be fully explained. I would write about contradiction, about Keats's formulation of negative capability, about Lorca's *duende*, and about the utopian dreams of the Surrealist poets. I would write about the excellence of dictionaries, and the necessity of getting literal with language, and how the slippery, provisional nature of language itself is intimately related to the power of poetry. I would also not leave out the way poems communicate ideas, the way they can feel so truthful and wise.

I began to take notes, to read, to write down thoughts. I kept talking with people, running my ideas by them. I changed my mind, again and again.

In 2007, I met my future wife, Sarah, and then a year later moved to San Francisco, where she lived. I stopped traveling so much, and was able to begin assembling an actual book. As I wrote and rewrote, I discovered that, beyond the elusiveness and the variety of the subject matter, there were fundamentally difficult, even paradoxical obstacles to writing a book about how to read poetry.

For one thing, the act of treating poetry like a difficult activity one needs to master

can easily perpetrate those mistaken, and pervasive, ideas about poetry that make it hard to read in the first place. Like classical music, poetry has an unfortunate reputation for requiring special training and education to appreciate, which makes most of us feel (unnecessarily) as if we haven't studied enough to read it. In his widely read introduction to *The Best Poems of the English Langu*[illegible]om writes, "The art of reading poetry begins with mastering allusiven[illegible]oems, from the simple to the very complex." This is not true. The art [illegible] does not *begin* with thinking about other cultural products, or [illegible]ents, or great philosophies. It begins with reading the words of the poem, which sounds very simple, and is, except that it quickly becomes very interesting. Reading poetry, we need to remember that we are all experts in words; we have been for a long time. And any word we don't know we can look up in the dictionary that will always be beside us when we read.

To learn to read poetry is first a matter of forgetting many incorrect things we have learned in school. And then of learning to accept what is right before us on the page. A big part of what the book needed to do, I realized, was to demonstrate ways of reading poetry that would resimplify and redirect our attention toward the purpose of poetry.

The question was not really *what* poetry is (poems can be so many things), but *why* it is written, and what it does. It seems that our inability to grasp why we are reading poetry, for reasons fundamentally different from why we read all other forms of writing, is what makes poetry so hard to understand.

To explore why we read poetry and what it does, it is necessary to talk about the experience of reading poetry. The problem is, that experience is an elusive one to try to capture in words. For one thing, it differs from person to person, though there are some commonalities about the genre of poetry, its function and effects, that we can discuss. More important, when a person truly falls in love with a poem, it is usually because it feels like a private experience. Moving through the poem, the reader feels a kind of understanding that is hard to paraphrase or resay. Therefore, the essential knowledge of a poem, what can make it feel so necessary, cannot ever fully be put into other words. The better the poem, the harder it is to talk about it.

John Ashbery writes in "Paradoxes and Oxymorons" that experiencing a poem is:

> A deeper outside thing, a dreamed role-pattern,
> As in the division of grace these long August days
> Without proof. Open-ended. And before you know
> It gets lost in the steam and chatter of typewriters.

Ashbery's poem [illegible]at feeling of being just on the verge of knowing, and even for a momen[illegible]omething the poem has told us, something vital. But before you can hol[illegible]nowledge, it is gone, at le[illegible] read the poem [illegible]rience of getting close to the unsayable an[illegible]nd how we are [illegible]lace beyond words by words themselves, i[illegible]f this book. [illegible] in any danger, and never has been. It ha[illegible] the entirety of [illegible]or at least as long as we have been using language to communicate, and I am quite sure that there will be poetry as long as there are people who can speak, and probably even after. Probably even robots will write it, just as soon as they get souls. No matter what we say about it, or don't, poetry inevitably will (as Auden wrote) keep surviving in the valley of its making.

But for so many of us, that does not seem to be enough. People carry so many incorrect ideas about poetry into their readings of it, ones that ruin the experience before they even get to have it. Also, there is a lot to say about poetry, interesting ways of thinking about it out loud and in writing that can bring us closer to it.

Writing this book, I came to think of my task as [illegible]gether into the experience of reading poetry, without destroying it. I h[illegible]ay to clear out some unhelpful ideas about poetry that make that expe[illegible]o have. I'd like to think that this book is, itself, an example in prose of Keats's famous concept of

negative capability: saying no to a certain kind of rigidity in thinking, to open up the creative possibility of a new form of attention, of understanding.

Over years of writing, the book also got more personal and autobiographical, a combination of memoir, analysis, and argument. I discovered that what I was really writing about was the necessity of poetry: why it matters, and how in the personal and public spheres poetry can help us live our lives.

I have always been resistant to hitch up poetry to the wagon of utility. As John Keats wrote in a letter, "I hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us." Poetry seems to get worse the more it seems interested in lecturing and instructing us, usually about things that we already know and agree with. To think of poetry as useful in a social or political way also struck me as dangerous, in that it threatens to demand of poetry something that prose can do far better, and therefore to argue poetry into extinction.

However, the more I worked on this book, the more I realized that I do, in fact, believe that poetry has social and political uses. This book has become, both implicitly and explicitly, an explanation of and an argument for those uses. The usefulness of poetry has less to do with delivering messages (which we can just as easily get from prose) and far more to do with what poems can do to our language, reenlivening and reenergizing it, and thereby drawing us into a different form of attention and awareness.

This book was written not to give all the answers (as if that were even possible), but to be a starting point. Reading it should make it more possible for anyone to find the poems that matter to them. Most of all, I hoped that when I was finished with this book, whenever anyone told me they don't know how to read poetry, I could hand them this book and say, I believe just by virtue of being alive you already do.

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THREE BEGINNINGS AND THE MACHINE OF POETRY

HAD YOU TOLD ME WHEN I WAS YOUNG THAT I WAS GOING TO become a poet, I would have been bewildered. Not only did I not read or care about poetry, but I didn't even really imagine (or wonder) whether there was such a thing as a living poet at all. Poetry was something you did in school. It was old and boring. I never would have dreamed it would become central to my life.

In 1985, I was a senior in a big high school in Maryland. It was spring, English class, time of crushes, time of the dreaded poetry unit. The teacher handed around a list, and we had to pick one poet to write a research paper on. I chose W. H. Auden of the mysterious gender, probably because she or he for alphabetical reasons appeared at the top of the list.

From the library I procured a book and started reading the poems. There was no reason to think I was going to enjoy them. I was not a particularly artistic kid, and I didn't work on our high school literary magazine, or write. Nothing was auspicious. I do not remember opening the book. Yet to this day I still remember reading the first few lines of "Musée des Beaux Arts":

> About suffering they were never wrong,
> The Old Masters: how well they understood
> Its human position: how it takes place
> While someone else is eating or opening a window or just
> walking dully along

and something just clicked. I can't say I felt I immediately understood everything, but the poem seemed to mean something I could not quite put my finger on, something important to me.

This poem was talking about how real suffering is not dramatic, but takes place in ordinary life, "while someone else is eating or opening a window." It's actually not about suffering exactly, but about how people don't *realize* that suffering is happening all the time, while they are doing their activities, "walking dully along." I could definitely relate to this; it seemed right. I knew this was true, as many teenagers do.

I did not know who the Old Masters were. Obviously, they were old, and they were masters. So they were in control of things, or thought they were, and had been for a long time, it seemed. As the poem says, they were never wrong, at least not about suffering (so are they wrong now? or are they gone?).

Later I learned Auden was talking about great painters, in particular Bruegel. But when I first read the words "Old Masters," something else came to mind, a more general idea that at one time there were people who knew and were in control, but not any longer. I think it had to do with the feeling of being a teenager, coming into adulthood: that scary and inevitable awakening into the truth about your parents and teachers, that they are not gods or masters at all.

The poem thinks about suffering in a general, distanced, even cold way. The ideas are interesting and sometimes a bit complex, but you don't need anything but your attentive mind and a basic facility with English language to understand what is going on. It's well written, and sounds good when you say it out loud, but there is nothing particularly fancy or obviously patterned or "poetic" about the language. There are, it turns out, unobtrusive end rhymes, ones I didn't even notice until much later. But

overall, it seemed hardly different from good prose.

More than anything else, what I liked about the beginning of this poem, and still do, was something about *how* the poem was saying what it was saying. This effect starts right at the beginning of the poem, with the delay in the subject of the first sentence. The word (and therefore the idea of) "suffering" comes first, and we have to wait a little while to find out who this "they" is who "were never wrong."

So when the Old Masters enter the poem, in the second line, it is grand and exciting, a little theatrical, especially after the line break. We have to wait an extra instant, and our eyes have to travel from the end of the first line to the beginning of the second, to find out the rest of the sentence. Who are they? The sentence seems almost biblical, or at least old-fashioned, the way it is reversed. It makes me feel a certain way about what is being said, that it is serious, and has to do with truths that are not merely contemporary.

I liked other poems by Auden too, such as "A Lullaby," which begins, "The din of work is subdued, / another day has westered / and mantling darkness arrived," which seemed to me a pretty and sad way of describing the end of the day, the sunset, the darkness coming on. I knew that time of day from the long afternoons and early evenings in my family's own house, after school, before dinner, waiting for my father to come home.

But most of all, "Musée des Beaux Arts." I still love this poem. There's a cruel humor there, which I'm only a little sorry to say must have appealed to the sixteen-year-old me: while people are suffering, "dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse / Scratches its innocent behind on a tree." The poem describes a painting of the fall of Icarus. The end of the poem still gives me actual chills. The boy with his wax wings flies too close to the sun, despite the warnings of his father, and falls into the water, and no one really cares:

> . . . and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
> Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
> Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

It is possible that I identified with that boy, who ignored his father's warnings, and whose suffering seems of no real consequence to anyone. Or maybe I felt like the expensive delicate ship. Or both, or something else altogether, I really don't remember. But for me, an anxious suburban kid afraid of disappointing everyone, the world got suddenly big and strange and full of contradictions that see[illegible]

I liked this feeling, and I liked thinking the poem thro[illegible] without the help of any teachers or books. In fact, even though it wa[illegible] a research paper, I wrote it all from my head, for which I was gen[illegible]n't get me wrong, this wasn't some kind of lasting revelation. I completely forgot about poetry for years. But I think, just for a moment, I got the message that I could be in direct contact with poetry, without any kind of intermediary. It was a gift I accidentally received, because I was fortunate enough to encounter the right poem for me, at just the right time, when I was ready. Somewhere deep in myself I understood that there was something only poetry could do, a way only a poem could mean, and that I needed that feeling.

THINKING BACK NOW, I REMEMBER ANOTHER TIME, LONG BEFORE I read Auden, one I had completely forgotten, when I had a deep and private experience with poetry. It was 1972, and I was in first grade, in Washington, D.C. I went to Oyster Elementary, a small school just a few blocks away from our little row house. Oyster was bilingual, which meant that we took turns holdin[illegible]f things (duck, house, ocean) and solemnly saying both the English and t[illegible]rds.

In the morning when we entered ou[illegible]t was bright, and in the afternoon the sun was on the other side of the b[illegible]g, leaving our room dark and melancholy.

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