

A MIRROR AND A BAROMETER:
ON THE PUBLIC USE OF POETRY

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ABSTRACT

Poetry, as a contemporary literary genre, is generally read by a small, self-selecting audience, and in this sense, it largely remains a private art. This paper discusses the public use of this private art, to consider if and how it can make a positive contribution to civil discourse and engagement in civic life. It affirms that poetry does have a public use, that it is an art form uniquely capable of fostering a sense of cultural cohesion by expressing the shared values of a community. This paper explores how the work of five individual poets exemplifies a public use of poetry across time and cultures: the Classical Roman poet Virgil, the Late Medieval Italian poet Dante, the English Romantic poet William Wordsworth, the twentieth century francophone poet Léopold Sédar Senghor, and the twentieth century Irish poet Seamus Heaney.

As an introduction to this exploration of how poetry can yield power in public life, and what use it has for civil society, this paper looks briefly at remarks from three contemporary American poets: the current Poet Laureate of the United States, Tracy K. Smith, the poet, critic and former Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, Dana Gioia, and the poet, critic and farmer Wendell Berry. Then, focusing on the epic and lyric genres, it asserts that the techniques of meter, diction and metaphor are integral to the durability of poetic expression.

This orientation is followed by a brief survey of five potential public uses that can be attributed to this literary genre. From Plato's harsh critique of poets in *The Republic*, one infers poetry's use to inculcate a moral lesson; from William Wordsworth's "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads," the use of poetry to rectify emotions; from Carolyn Forché's anthology, *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness*, the use of poetry as historical witness and socio-political obligation; from Seamus Heaney's various essays the use of poetry as a means of redress and affirmation; and from Earl Shorris' *Riches for the Poor*, the use of poetry, in a humanities curriculum, as a means of social and political inclusion.

These five lenses are then applied to selections from the five poets mentioned, with the result of seeing how the private voices and the public concerns are successfully interwoven. Three public organizations that rely on poetry in their programming to advance civil society are also highlighted: the Clemente Course in the Humanities, the Free Minds Book Club and Writing Workshop, and Split This Rock.

The paper concludes that poetry is a constant and regenerative resource for humanity. Its primary public use is to create cultural cohesion: either by the solidarity created by public programs that utilize poetry, or by the values expressed by public poets, whose work mirrors their own individual spirit while being a barometer for the community in which they live and write.

In memory of my beloved parents, Valaire and Albert Merz

I had come to the edge of the water,
soothed by just looking, idling over it
as if it were a clear barometer

or a mirror...

From "Station Island, VII" by Seamus Heaney

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Introduction:

A Trio of Contemporary Poets on the Public Use of Poetry

The current Poet Laureate of the United States, Tracy K. Smith, as profiled in *The New York Times Magazine*, inspires a contemporary reader of poetry to consider this literary form from several angles, and to take stock of its place in public life. When Ms. Smith is quoted as saying, “You want a poem to unsettle something; there’s a deep and interesting kind of troubling that poems do,”¹ one is prompted to recall the well-known misgivings about poets that the ancient philosopher Plato held, and expressed in *The Republic*. In that philosophical dialogue, which has continued to be read and discussed for over two millennia, Socrates justified his banishment of poets from his ideal republic because of the unsettling and troubling influence poems can have on youth. It was an admission of the potential power of this literary form, an ambition which Ms. Smith herself has for her own work.

It’s not just the ability to unsettle that Ms. Smith praises in poetry, it is also “the meditative state of mind a poem induces,” which “she believes can be a ‘rehumanizing force,’ an antidote to the din of daily life.”² This capability is one that calls to mind the English Romantic poet William Wordsworth, who sought that meditative state for himself, and believed that lyric poetry, his own and the genre itself, could restore and refresh an increasingly frenetic society. The individual lyric voice has flourished since

¹ Ruth Franklin, “The Poem Cure,” *The New York Times Magazine*, April 15, 2018, 42.

² Ibid.

that era, but perhaps without reaching as broad an audience as the ancient and medieval epics found, and thereby losing some of its public power.

Yet Ms. Smith's own poems, in her newest collection, incorporate other voices: voices of African-American veterans of the Civil War, and this expanded perspective becomes her artistic reckoning with slavery: "The cumulative effect of these unadorned statements is unexpectedly powerful, a litany of wrong crying in the plainest terms for redress."³ In this role, poetry becomes both a witness to history and a goad to social and political consciousness. One thinks of the responsibility with which the poet and anthologist, Carolyn Forché, Ms. Smith's contemporary, charged poetry as she defined a new genre, poetry of witness. Ms. Smith also daringly employs the poetic device of erasure to rewrite the Declaration of Independence as a scathing accusation of injustice.

But she is as conscious of her own artful use of language as the poets she admires, among them Dickinson, Frost, Elizabeth Bishop, Philip Larkin, "poets whose plain language conceals a yearning for something metaphysical or eternal."⁴ And as a former student of the Irish Nobel Laureate, Seamus Heaney, she seems, like him, to be able to balance her personal aesthetics and public concerns with fidelity and care.

She is also balancing her role as an "official representative of the U. S. government at a time when the country is bitterly split along political and racial lines."⁵ She is using her position as Poet Laureate to travel around the country: "I want to just go to places where writers don't usually go ... and say: 'Here are some poems. Do they

³ Ruth Franklin, "The Poem Cure," *The New York Times Magazine*, April 15, 2018, 42.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

speak to you? What do you hear in them?”⁶ Her willingness to meet and engage with others, and to use poetry as “a shortcut to honest conversation ... to probe the spots where our culture is most sore,”⁷ is reminiscent of Earl Shorris’s grand and inclusive experiment in creating the Clemente Course in the Humanities for the poor and disadvantaged. That experiment continues today, teaching poetry and other humanities disciplines to those whose daily circumstances are primarily a matter of simple survival.

These various takes on poetry, inspired by the article on Ms. Smith, suggest a larger question behind them all: How does poetry yield power in public life, what is its use in civil society? Is it a question only if one subscribes to the premise of poetry having that kind of power, as writers from Plato to Shorris have done? There are many who doubt this, and poets themselves can challenge their peers. When the poet and critic Dana Gioia posed the question “Can Poetry Matter?”⁸ after surveying the American literary landscape in 1992, it was a question that in and of itself seemed a negative answer. Mr. Gioia lamented the fact that poets, in gaining positions within the academy as teachers and administrators, had become both a professional class and a specialized subculture, resulting in a loss of general readership. They had lost the influence held by poets who, fifty years ago, had supported themselves as critics and reviewers; this generation “had cultivated a public idiom. Prizing clarity and accessibility, they avoided specialist jargon ... and also tried to relate what was happening in poetry to social, political and artistic

⁶ Ruth Franklin, “The Poem Cure,” *The New York Times Magazine*, April 15, 2018, 42.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Dana Gioia, *Can Poetry Matter?: Essays on Poetry and American Culture* (St. Paul, Minn. Graywolf Press, 1992).

trends.”⁹ Mr. Gioia prescribed proposals to enable his “wish that poetry could again become a part of American public culture,”¹⁰ and one of these proposals will be considered further on in this paper.

Mr. Gioia’s warning about the specialization of poets had been sounded a decade earlier by the poet, critic, and farmer Wendell Berry, in his essay “The Specialization of Poetry.” He ascribes to the poet-specialists the belief that “a poem is not a point of clarification or connection between themselves and the world. . . . It is a seeking of self in words, the making of a word-world in which the word-self may be at home.”¹¹

Whichever side one took in this literary discussion, that the professionalism of poets had or had not marginalized and muted their public voices, the events of September 11, 2001, made the question of the public use of poetry tragically pertinent. Dealing with grief, incomprehension, and anxiety over the terrorist attacks so vividly experienced, general readers and literary specialists alike sought poems for the solace of “clarification and connection between themselves and the world.”

While my discussion started here with a consideration of the current poet laureate of the United States and the concerns of contemporary American poets, I intend to broaden this discussion of the public use of poetry, and to examine how this literary genre has contributed, over time and in various cultures, to civic discourse and life. Using approaches based on the writings of Plato, Wordsworth, Forché, Heaney, and Shorris, as well as other writers who have complemented their ideas, I will show how several

⁹ Gioia, 16.

¹⁰ Ibid., 22.

¹¹ Wendell Berry, *Standing by Words: Essays* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1983), 7.

individual poets made their contribution by fostering a sense of cultural cohesion and by expressing the shared values of their community. I will also explore how poetry organizations can further share and shape cultural values to the point of igniting political activism. My exploration will discuss subgenres within poetry, such as the ability of the epic and the lyric forms to reach a general audience, and whether poetry of witness is opposed to poetry of praise. This paper will also examine what might be the poet's strategy for balancing the tension between artistic imperatives and political stances, and whether, ultimately, poetry can demonstrably effect change or policy. I intend to show that poetry has had, and continues to have, a public use; that it fulfills a social need by being a public language, articulating values held in common by civil society.

But before looking more closely at poetry's civic utility, it is useful to define and narrow what we mean by this literary genre. If we asked someone, randomly, outside of academia, what makes a poem a poem, we might get an answer dependent upon the respondent's age. For a certain generation, the answer might be rhyme, or a certain form, such as a sonnet. For someone younger, the answer could be the syncopation of spoken word or hip hop or rap. These answers are all, in their way, correct, for they express the experience of hearing or reading poetry whose language has three noticeable qualities: It is rhythmic, distinctive, and vivid. These characteristics of poetic language originated in concepts first described by the Greek philosopher Aristotle in his work *Poetics*, and they have held as a description for poetic techniques over two millennia.

After speaking of the arts of representation such as painting, music and dance, Aristotle speaks of an art "which imitates by means of language alone, ... which may

combine different meters or consist of but one kind.”¹² Poetry is the art that relies on language alone as its medium. He attributes its origin to two human instincts: “imitation ... is one instinct of our nature. Next, there is the instinct for ‘harmony’ and rhythm, meters being manifestly sections of rhythm.”¹³ Rhythm is created in language by using meter, and the word itself is the Greek term for measure. Unlike meter in English poetry that measures the accent, i.e., the stress, laid upon a syllable or word, the qualitative meter of the Greeks measured the duration, the length of a sound.

The modern critic Paul Fussell has thoroughly delved into meter as “the most fundamental technique of order available to the poet,”¹⁴ and has examined its “strange power to burnish the commonplace.”¹⁵ Fussell further explains that meter can enhance the meaning of what is being said in three ways: “by distinguishing rhythmic from ordinary statement, ... by varying from itself [to] powerfully reinforce emotional effects ... ,” and finally, through “meters [that] can mean by association and convention.”¹⁶ Meter, in its endless variety, has been perhaps the most forceful characteristic of poetic language, up until the latter part of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when the use of meter became diluted and variable.¹⁷

¹² Aristotle, “Poetics” in *Classic Writings on Poetry*, ed. William Harmon (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 34.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁴ Paul Fussell, *Poetic Meter & Poetic Form*, Rev. ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), 5.

¹⁵ Fussell, *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁷ O. B. Hardison, Alex Preminger, and Frank J. Warnke, *The Princeton Handbook of Poetic Terms* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986), 78.

But the choice of the words themselves is as important as their sounds, and here also Aristotle establishes the standard for making language distinctive.

The perfection of Diction is to be at once clear and not mean. ... A certain admixture, accordingly, of unfamiliar terms is necessary. These, the strange word, the metaphor, the ornamental equivalent, etc., will save the language from seeming mean and prosaic, while the ordinary words in it will secure the requisite clearness.¹⁸

We shall see later what importance the English Romantic poet William Wordsworth gives to the use of poetic diction.

Within this consideration of distinctive language is mentioned the technique of metaphor, which involves “giving the thing a name that belongs to something else,” as Aristotle states.¹⁹ As a figure of speech, metaphor conveys “a condensed verbal relation ... variously described as comparison, contrast, analogy, similarity, juxtaposition, identity, tension, collision, fusion.”²⁰ Aristotle praises it highly: “A command of metaphor ... is the mark of genius, for to make good metaphors implies an eye for resemblances”;²¹ and modern critics too recognize its dynamism, “maintaining that metaphor marks off the poetic mode of vision and utterance from the logical or discursive mode.”²²

These poetic techniques of meter, diction and metaphor, first and crucially described by Aristotle, have remained the signature means by which ordinary language is shaped into poetry. And while he also mentions different genres: “Epic poetry and

¹⁸ Ibid., 194.

¹⁹ O. B. Hardison, Alex Preminger, and Frank J. Warnke, *The Princeton Handbook of Poetic Terms* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1986), 136.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Aristotle, “Poetics,” 56.

²² Hardison, Preminger, and Warnke, 136.

Tragedy, Comedy also and Dithyrambic,”²³ Aristotle’s work was not the foundation for the classification of poetic genres we have come to know. “The traditional triple division of poetic genre or kinds in the epic, the drama, the lyric ... was rather the result of a long ... process of compilation and adjustment, ... which did not reach the modern formula of the three divisions until the 16th century.”²⁴ This paper will confine its consideration of poetry to the genres of epic and lyric, to determine what power inheres in these modes to contribute to civil discourse and public life. Drama, as a genre of poetry capable of influencing civic engagement, has been amply discussed by others, including the contemporary philosopher Martha Nussbaum in her Jefferson Lecture of 2017, wherein she gave a reading of Aeschylus’ *Orestia* to underline her theme, “Powerlessness and the Politics of Blame.”²⁵

Narrowing our focus to these genres, and with an understanding of the techniques of the poet, we may more closely examine how it is that words, whether spoken aloud or printed on a page, can have the power to unsettle or to quiet, to witness, to elevate, or to encompass individuals or a group. It is not just what poetry says, but also the way in which it is said that produces these effects on us; the technique is integral to its expressive force

²³ Aristotle, “Poetics,” 33.

²⁴ Hardison, Preminger, and Warnke, 81.

²⁵ Martha C. Nussbaum, “*Powerlessness and the Politics of Blame*,” The University of Chicago, The Law School, <https://www.law.uchicago.edu/news/martha-c-nussbaums-jefferson-lecture-powerlessness-and-politics-blame> (accessed January 19, 2019).

Chapter One

Five ways of looking at poetry

I. *Plato's banishment reconsidered*

The question of the public use of poetry would have seemed odd to a citizen of Athens in the classical era, steeped as he was in the Homeric epics: “His poetry was a central part of every Athenian schoolboy’s education.”¹ Poetry was not just pervasive in Plato’s oral, preliterate society, but also essential: It functioned as a “kind of reference library or a vast tractate of ethics and politics and warfare. . . . It was a didactic instrument for transmitting the tradition.”² What made possible this transmission was meter, “the rhythmic word order organized cunningly in verbal and metrical patterns which were unique enough to retain their shape.”³ The tradition transmitted narratives of gods and heroes which had evolved over time, occurring as a “significant shift when mythic content . . . was transformed into stories of human beings told for no ostensible magic purpose but to honor or remember great men . . . [becoming] a vehicle for moral and ethical teaching by example.”⁴ It was because the epics had become so central to education that Plato felt compelled to dislodge poetry through Socrates’ chiseling criticisms voiced in *The Republic*.

¹ Robin Sowerby, *The Greeks: an Introduction to Their Culture* (London: Routledge, 1995), 1.

² Eric Alfred Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963), 43.

³ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁴ Hardison, Preminger, and Warnke, *The Princeton Handbook of Poetic Terms*, 158.

It is a shocking position that still reverberates today. The contemporary poet and novelist Ben Lerner cites it as “the most influential attack on poetry in recorded history,”⁵ and goes on to admit, “I remember first reading Plato at the Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library and feeling poetry must be a powerful art if the just city depended on its suppression.”⁶ But, as Lerner goes on to discuss, Plato’s opinion of poetry is much more complicated than a simplified and absolute exile of its practitioners.

Book three of Plato’s *Republic* launches Socrates’ criticism of poetry, based on its “erroneous representation made of the nature of gods and heroes,”⁷ a fault he found in both Hesiod and Homer. Socrates saw Homer’s depiction of the gods as less than pious: quarreling among themselves, disguising themselves, saddened to see their mortal creations dying, and he recommended expunging these passages.⁸ So, too, the passages which show heroes as less than heroic should be struck, as when Achilles is heard prizing life itself above undying glory won in battle. Socrates would have the youth of Athens, the future guardians of the republic, “fear slavery more than death.”⁹

Socrates also severely critiques poetic style, preferring narration to imitation, “as human nature is not twofold or manifold, for one man plays one part only.”¹⁰ This discussion culminates in the vehement recommendation for “banishment of the poet who

⁵ Ben Lerner, *The Hatred of Poetry*, first edition (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016), 17.

⁶ Lerner, 19.

⁷ Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: The Colonial Press, 1901), 58.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁹ Plato, “The Republic,” in *Classic Writings on Poetry*, ed. William Harmon (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 5.

¹⁰ Plato, Jowett, 81.

can imitate anyone and anything.”¹¹ When Socrates returns to the discussion of poetry in book ten, he again brings up the discussion of imitation, as an inferior kind of art, “at third remove from nature.”¹² More dangerous though, is the effect, by which, as critic Julia Annas summarizes, “poetry appeals to and strengthens the lower part of the soul, which resists reason. Poetry encourages short-term indulgence in our emotions when reason would forbid their gratification because it is useless or harmful for the agent if he considers his life as a whole.”¹³

It is clear from Plato’s strong and divided opinions about poetry that he himself both experienced and feared “an uncontrolled psychic ‘surrender’ which is precisely Socrates’ greatest charge against Homer and the tragedians,”¹⁴ as the critic Stephen Halliwell puts it; he speculates that Plato has an “expressed desire for finding a way of reconciling poetry with philosophy, ... the desire for a new, ethically informed way of ‘listening to poetry.’”¹⁵ In Plato’s own era, it was Aristotle who countered Socrates’ fierce opinion of poetry’s harmful moral and emotional effects; he credited the pity and fear aroused by art as “effecting the proper purgation of these emotions.”¹⁶

¹¹ Elizabeth Asmis, “Plato on Poetic Creativity,” *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, ed. Richard Kraut (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 348.

¹² Julia Annas, “Plato on the Triviality of Literature,” *Plato on Beauty, Wisdom, and the Arts*, ed. J.M.E. Moravcsik and Philip Temko (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1982), 5.

¹³ Annas, 7.

¹⁴ Stephen Halliwell, “Antidotes and Incantations: Is There a Cure for Poetry in Plato’s Republic,” *Plato and the Poets*, ed. Pierre Destrée and Fritz-Gregor Herrmann (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 264.

¹⁵ Halliwell, 265.

¹⁶ Aristotle, “Poetics,” 38.

But in book three, Socrates had relented, admitting a preference for “the rougher and severe poet or story-teller, who will imitate the virtuous only,”¹⁷ and in book ten he stresses, “Hymns to the gods and praises of famous men are the only poetry which ought to be admitted into our State.”¹⁸ Annas draws an interesting conclusion: “Plato cannot be considered the advocate of ‘civic poetry’; he knows that poetry if it is real cannot serve civic purposes, or at least cannot be depended upon to do so, and he knows that the verses he finally permits are not real poetry.”¹⁹ Other critics, too, have disregarded this qualified acceptance of a certain kind of poetry, but I venture that one can derive from Plato’s stance a public use for poetry as a means of moral education, instilling, preferably, piety and courage. Moreover, divine hymns and praises of mortals were hardly seen as limiting subjects by the epic poets Virgil and Dante, whose work we will consider in chapter two.

II. *Wordsworth’s manifesto for emotional education*

Some two millennia later, the young English poet William Wordsworth, who would become the most representative poet of the literary period known as Romanticism, as acknowledged by both his contemporaries and generations to come,²⁰ makes very clear his belief that poetry has a public use, in the *Preface to Lyrical Ballads (1800 and 1802)*

¹⁷ Plato, “The Republic,” 14.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁹ Annas, 23.

²⁰ M.H. Abrams, Foreword to *William Wordsworth and the Age of English Romanticism*, J.W. Wordsworth, Michael C. Jaye, and Robert Woof (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987), vii.

His bold public intention was put forth in a very literate society, where print culture flourished through publishers of books, pamphlets, journals and reviews, and appealed to an audience much expanded beyond that of the pre-literate citizens of Classical Athens, the aristocratic, noble families. Yet for all the subsequent centuries of widely expanded readership, the subject matter and the genres of poetry had remained largely focused on the upper classes. Now at the ripe conjunction of political, intellectual, and economic ferment, and amid the reverberations of the French Revolution, Wordsworth's poems in the *Lyrical Ballads*, as the critic M.H. Abrams describes below,

transferred to their stance and subject matter the political principles of human equality and fraternity ... [and] subverted traditional European poetics in which the scale of literary genres up to epic and tragedy at the top had a built-in class structure. ... Wordsworth's revolution against the *ancien regime* in poetry was more than merely egalitarian: it inverted the established social hierarchy by choosing not only the lowly ... but also the ignominious, the scorned, and the social outcasts as the protagonists in serious, sometimes tragic poems.²¹

But the Preface, which so deliberately explains the theory underlying his poems, is neither a political tract nor a call for civic engagement; it is rather an exploration "in what manner language and the human mind act and react on each other."²² It is an attack on "the gaudiness and inane phraseology of modern writing."²³ It proposes to describe "incidents and situations from common life ... in language really used by men, ... tracing in them the primary laws of our nature." Wordsworth takes the potential power of poetry

²¹ Abrams, viii - ix

²² William Wordsworth and Stephen Gill, "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*," (1800 and 1802) *William Wordsworth: 21st-Century Authors* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2012), 58.

²³ *Ibid.*

just as seriously as Plato—for him, “poetry was a moral agent or it was nothing,”²⁴—but unlike the ancient philosopher who prizes reason above feeling, he wants to engage and inform the emotions of the public. His means of doing so are twofold: the choice of subject and the use of plainer diction and regular meter in his poetic language.

Wordsworth’s subjects drawn from common, rural and marginalized lives are not just selected to reflect his political leanings, but also because he finds in “low and rustic life better soil for the essential passions of the heart.”²⁵ He believes that feelings among these unnoticed and or dismissed individuals are more evident and more genuine, and may provide an emotional education. (He gave a copy of his poems to a distinguished politician, “with a view to shew that men who do not wear fine cloaths can feel deeply.”²⁶) He also is drawn to these humble settings wherein “the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature.”²⁷ Wordsworth’s much quoted characterization, “all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,”²⁸ often leaves out the further component: the poet’s long meditation upon those feelings is necessary, in order to present them in such a way “that the understanding of the being to whom we address ourselves . . . must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, and his affections ameliorated.”²⁹

²⁴ Stephen Gill, *William Wordsworth: a Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 189.

²⁵ Wordsworth, “Preface,” 59.

²⁶ Gill, 190.

²⁷ Wordsworth, “Preface,” 59.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 60.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

This proposed emotional education, and the psychological insights that Wordsworth offers, as he follows, in his various subjects, “the fluxes and refluxes of the mind when agitated by the great and simple affections of our nature,”³⁰ develops, in his later work, as his great subject, “the theme of the individual mind, and ... the meaning of life lived in time.”³¹ But, as mentioned earlier, the appropriate language is of equal importance to this endeavor, and Wordsworth’s offensive against “‘the inane phraseology’ of the more lifeless verse of the time—personifications, clichés, trite mythology, and the like”³² had a lasting impact. His simplified diction, as Abrams states, “transformed the inherited language of poetry into a medium adequate to expressing new ways of perceiving, new modes of experience, new relations of individual consciousness to itself, the past, and others.”³³

In a time of tumultuous social and political upheaval, in which Wordsworth discerns that “a multitude of causes, unknown to former times, are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind,” he makes a definitive claim: that poetry not only could counteract destructive cultural forces, but that it has a duty to do so.³⁴ As his biographer Stephen Gill quotes from a letter, “A great Poet ought to a certain degree to rectify men’s feelings, to give them new compositions of feeling, to

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Abrams, ix.

³² Hardison, Preminger, and Warnke, *The Princeton Handbook of Poetic Terms*, 197.

³³ Abrams, xi.

³⁴ Gill, 190.

render their feelings more sane pure and permanent.”³⁵ Wordsworth’s vision of poetry as a means of emotional and psychological education, to cultivate empathetic feeling for all, including those on the margins of society, and to find peace within oneself and with nature, still has use for us today.

III. *Milosz and Forché: Poetry of Witness and Social Obligation*

The cataclysms of the twentieth century, with the unfolding of two world wars, concentration camps and genocide, and the example and further threat of nuclear annihilation, could have understandably silenced the individual lyric voice for good, as without impact or purpose in the public sphere. Instead, the critic Theodore Adorno’s pronouncement, “It is barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz” and its implicit underlying question, “How can anyone write poetry that can comprehend the barbarity of the Holocaust,”³⁶ is answered by the late Nobel Prize- winning poet, essayist, anthologist Czeslaw Milosz, who had witnessed firsthand the barbarity as a member of the Resistance in Poland. His essays, *The Witness of Poetry*, share, in some sense, the Wordsworthian notion of poetry’s ability to counter the destructive forces of culture but gives to poetry an even larger role and greater responsibility.

Milosz considers poetry, from a perspective both personal and national, admitting his own East European and “peculiar perspective.” He writes, “We tend to view it as a witness and participant in one of mankind’s major transformations. . . . It witnesses us.”³⁷

³⁵ Gill, 198.

³⁶ Billy Mills, “How Poetry Can Be Written After Auschwitz,” *Guardian Books Blog*, January, 11, 2011 (accessed January 27, 2019).

³⁷ Czesław Milosz, *The Witness of Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1983), 4.

After summarizing how European poetry of the nineteenth and the twentieth century became an art of “‘impoverishment and narrowing,’ because its interests became limited to an aesthetic and ... individualistic order,”³⁸ Milosz recounts how, under “the Nazi occupation of Poland, the ‘schism between the poet and the great human family’ disappears and poetry becomes as essential as bread.”³⁹ He explains how this is possible: “When misfortune touches a human collective, ... people’s attitude toward the language changes. ... [It] must name reality which exists objectively, massive, tangible, and terrifying in its concreteness.”⁴⁰ In this sense, Polish poetry served, and survived, as a witness to what the country had undergone: “Probably in no other language than Polish are there so many terrifying poems, documents of the Holocaust.”⁴¹

But Milosz acknowledges the “difficulty in finding the distance to transform this material artistically” and cites the work of Anna Swirszczynska, thirty years after her participation in the Warsaw uprising, for its “very short poems, without meter or rhyme, each one a microreport on a single incident or situation. This is a most humble art of mimesis, reality as it is remembered.”⁴² For all of its immensely important work of testifying to collective misfortune, poetic language assumes no grandeur, rather it is stripped of its age-old techniques.

³⁸ Ibid., 26.

³⁹ Ibid., 31.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 80.

⁴¹ Ibid., 83.

⁴² Ibid., 85.

Milosz's characterization of Polish poetry as an act of witness—"in it a peculiar fusion of the individual and the historical took place, which means that events burdening a whole community are perceived by a poet as touching him in a most personal manner"⁴³—was further developed and formally defined by the younger poet and anthologist Carolyn Forché a decade later. In a magisterial mapping of Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas, Forché's anthology *Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness* locates the work of 145 poets, including Milosz, "who endured conditions of historical and social extremity," seeking and finding in their work "the impress of extremity upon the poetic imagination."⁴⁴

Forché situates poetry of witness between the realm of the personal and the political, and adds to it a third dimension, "one that can describe the space between the state and the supposedly safe havens of the personal. Let us call this space 'the social.'"⁴⁵ In her second anthology, *Poetry of Witness: The Tradition in English 1500 – 2001*, Forché further distinguishes this genre from strictly political poetry that is "documentary literature or poetic reportage. ... The mode of political confessionality ... in my sense of the term ... is a mode of reading, rather than writing, of readerly encounter with the literature of that-which-happened, and its mode is evidentiary rather than representational."⁴⁶

⁴³ Milosz, 95.

⁴⁴ Carolyn Forché, Introduction to *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness*. 1st ed. New York: W.W. Norton, 1993), 29 -30.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁴⁶ Carolyn Forché, Introduction to *Poetry of Witness: the Tradition in English, 1500-2001*. 1st Ed., Carolyn Forché and Duncan Wu (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014), 21.

As the poem is evidence of a lived experience, its “language breaks, becomes tentative, interrogation, kaleidoscopic ... and may be comprised of fragments.”⁴⁷ Both traditional techniques and language itself are fractured under the experience of atrocity, and yet poets will write, using new forms: “postcards, letters, and reports on the news—all of these communal forms, ways of writing that stress the interpersonal aspects of poetry, the public side of literature. They underline the collective urgency that propels a literature of the social.”⁴⁸ Poetry of witness is written under very personal and specific duress, but it reaches out to a public; it speaks to and for collective solidarity, “the owning of one’s infinite responsibility for the *other one*.”⁴⁹ It could be said that poetry has no greater public use than the imperative to witness human suffering and to reinforce social bonds of obligation.

IV. *Seamus Heaney’s crediting poetry for its redress and affirmation*

Another Nobel Laureate, the late poet Seamus Heaney, of Ireland, wrestles with and answers to this tremendous responsibility that poetry shoulders in a series of prose works. In his essays *The Government of the Tongue*, he admits that he has himself had been cognizant of “a kind of shadowy judging figure above every poet, ... the ‘poet as witness,’ and he represents poetry’s solidarity with the doomed.”⁵⁰ Heaney responds to this obligation by citing a the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam, who himself endured extremity: refusing to capitulate to Soviet demands to write poetry that would be

⁴⁷ Ibid., 25.

⁴⁸ Forché, *Against Forgetting*, 36.

⁴⁹ Forché, *Poetry of Witness*, 26.

⁵⁰ Seamus Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue : Selected Prose, 1978-1987*, 1st American ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989), xvi.

propaganda resulted in his harassment, banishment and ultimate disappearance in a Soviet work camp. Nevertheless, Mandelstam never ceased “affirming the essential humanism of the act of poetry, ... its unlooked-for joy in being itself.”⁵¹ Heaney sees in Mandelstam’s life and work an example of artistic integrity: “For him, obedience to poetic impulse was obedience to conscience; lyric action constituted radical witness ... to the art of poetry as an unharnessed, non-didactic, non-party-dictated, inspired act.”⁵²

Such an example would necessarily speak to Heaney’s own life experience of being an Irish poet in Northern Ireland during the years of sectarian violence, when he himself was pressured for work that would take an explicit position for the Catholic side. But even if bolstered by his belief in the liberty of poetry as expressive of human liberty, Heaney does not suggest that poetry should look away from political and social circumstances that are harmful. Rather, in his next collection of essays, *The Redress of Poetry*, he gives to poetry the fuller capability to redress the wrongs that have occurred over time. To illustrate his view, Heaney cites Robert Frost’s poem “Directive,” saying that it “suggests that the imaginative transformation of human life is the means by which we can most truly grasp and comprehend it.”⁵³ While poetry has a responsibility to witness the travails of humanity, it also has the capacity to transform the human spirit. Interestingly, Heaney returns to the first critic in our discussion of public uses of poetry—Plato—noting that while he did question poetry’s place in the republic, “yet his

⁵¹ Ibid., xix.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), xv.

world of ideal forms also provides the court of appeal through which poetic imagination seeks to redress whatever is wrong or exacerbating in the prevailing conditions.”⁵⁴

Heaney also mentions the necessary “supreme fictions” of Wallace Stevens, and goes on to elaborate that “the poet’s imagining ... offers a response to reality which has a liberating and verifying effect upon the individual spirit.”⁵⁵ Though this also causes Heaney, fairly, to consider: “Yet I can see how such a function would be deemed insufficient by a political activist.”⁵⁶ But again he appeals to two writers who have endured extreme conditions and yet have maintained their belief in “the idea of counterweighting, balancing out the forces of redress, tilting the scales of reality towards some transcendent equilibrium”—the French philosopher, mystic, and activist in WWII, Simone Weil,⁵⁷ and the Czech playwright, dissident and later president, Vaclav Havel.⁵⁸ This counterweighting function of poetry is both transformative and transcendent, for the individual and the collective, and Heaney further on refers to the achievement of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* in “fulfilling its counterweighting function. It becomes another truth to which we can have recourse, before which we can know ourselves in a more fully empowered way.”⁵⁹

For Heaney, the power of poetry to redress real events is linked to its own redress as an art bound to and by its ancient techniques, that it remains “an answer given in terms

⁵⁴ Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry*, 1.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

of metre and syntax, of tone and musical trueness ... not only as a matter of proffered argument and edifying content, but as a matter of angelic potential, a motion of the soul.”⁶⁰ This defense of the lyric aspect of poetry is taken up again in Heaney’s Nobel Lecture, “Crediting Poetry.” While acknowledging that the catastrophes of the twentieth century have shaped a shared poetic response based on “realism and an aesthetic sense wary of crediting the positive note ... rightly suspicious of that which gives too much consolation,”⁶¹ Heaney himself, like his earlier cited models of Mandelstam, Weil, and Havel, will not be utterly bowed by the weight of the world’s tragedy. Instead, as a working poet, he consciously embraces his need “to make space in my reckoning and imagining for the marvelous as well as for the murderous.”⁶²

While crediting poetry for its “documentary adequacy which answers all that we know about the intolerable,”⁶³ he also affirms that “there is another kind of adequacy which is specific to lyric poetry.”⁶⁴ And Heaney mimetically conjures it thus: “the energy released by linguistic fission and fusion, with the buoyancy generated by cadence and tone and rhyme and stanza.”⁶⁵ As both a writer and reader of poetry, he is seeking the unique grace that technique enables: “to repose in the stability conferred by a musically

⁶⁰ Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry*, 192.

⁶¹ Seamus Heaney, *Crediting Poetry: the Nobel Lecture*, 1st ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), 28.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 31.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 49-50.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 49-50.

satisfying order of sounds.”⁶⁶ This repose, this stability engendered by the use of form, is certainly in tune with the Wordsworth’s objective for readers of poetry to find and hold peace within, amid the upheavals and failures of civil society. Heaney’s stance of crediting poetry for its redress and affirmation is a public use that is vital in a world more and more connected in its local and global concerns.

V. ***Earl Shorris’s use of a humanities curriculum, including poetry, as a means of social and political inclusion***

The fifth and final public use of poetry that this paper proposes is suggested by the extraordinary program created by a man who was neither philosopher nor poet, but a social critic and writer, Earl Shorris, whose many books were “sharply critical of Western culture as sliding toward plutocracy and materialism.”⁶⁷ As Shorris was researching the causes of poverty, he encountered a woman in prison who challenged him to see poverty as other than a lack of financial resources. It was instead a different lack, as the conversation shows below,

“the moral life of downtown”—meaning, she said, exposure to “plays, museums, concerts, lectures, you know.”

“You mean the humanities,” Mr. Shorris replied, surprised by her answer.

“Yes, Earl, the humanities,” she said.

Ms. Walker’s words triggered an epiphany of sorts, Mr. Shorris wrote in a 1997 *Harper’s* essay, Poverty was an absence of reflection and beauty, not an absence of money.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Ibid., 51.

⁶⁷ Paul Vitello, “*Earl Shorris, 75, Dies; Fought Poverty With Knowledge*,” obituary printed with permission of *New York Times*, The Clemente Course in the Humanities, <https://clementecourse.org/about-us/remembering-earl-shorris> (accessed January 29, 2019).

⁶⁸ Ibid.

This perspective inspired Shorris to set about testing whether the traditional curriculum of the humanities could in fact be a means of enabling the disadvantaged to exit their state of poverty, and he describes the experiment in two books, *Riches for the Poor* and *The Art of Freedom*.

Mr. Shorris's idea was to teach what he considered the ultimate skills: reflection and critical thinking, as taught by the humanities. "If the multigenerational poor are to make the leap out of poverty, it will require a new kind of thinking—reflection," he wrote in 1997. "And that is a beginning." The study of the humanities, he said, is "in itself a redistribution of wealth."⁶⁹

Out of this impulse Shorris created what has been recognized as a singular and long-lived educational program: the Clemente Course in the Humanities. As the *New York Times* obituary of Shorris describes: "Established in 1995 with 25 students at the Roberto Clemente Family Guidance Center in the East Village of Manhattan, the program offers the disadvantaged a 10-month curriculum of philosophy, history, art, literature and logic."⁷⁰ The program is tuition free, and provides day-care and transportation. Its curriculum, which always includes poetry, fosters the ability to think critically and reflect. It further enables those whose circumstances have previously limited them to merely surviving, to take "this profound step out of the private world into the public space in which politics occurs."⁷¹ Shorris clarifies his sense of the political action that this education brings about: "I don't mean 'political' in the sense of voting in an election but in the way that Pericles used the word: to mean activity with other people

⁶⁹ Vitello, "Earl Shorris,"

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Earl Shorris, *Riches for the Poor: the Clemente Course in the Humanities*, Rev. ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000), 55.

at every level, from the family to the neighborhood to the broader community to the city-state.”⁷²

Indeed the program succeeds in this outward rippling way: its participants become “role models to others. ... The course reaches the community through the children of many of the students and through their families and friends. ... Dignity spreads outward from the classrooms. ... The day care we generally provide, linking the children to the educational experience of their parents, is a way to break the cycle of poverty.”⁷³ The program has been adapted in many cities, as well as in Alaska and Native American communities, Yucatan and Darfur, adjusting and broadening its content for differing cultures. As of 2014, more than ten thousand students have benefited from Shorris’s vision. It does not seem an exaggeration to concur that this intentional, inclusive immersion in the humanities, including the critical reflection on poetry, is effective “in a radical way as an instrument of justice for the poor.”⁷⁴ This is a public use of poetry as a practical pedagogy, which greatly contributes to civic life.

These, then, are the five approaches to which we will have recourse in considering the public use of poetry: as a means of moral education, derived from Plato; as a means of emotional, psychological education, as intended by Wordsworth; as a poetry of witness and social obligation, as described by Forché; as an art of affirmation and transcendent redress, as envisioned by Heaney; and finally as a pedagogy of inclusion and justice, as created by Shorris.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Shorris, *Riches*, 66.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 111.

Chapter Two

Virgil: A Latin poet of wholeness and belonging *Aeneid*, Book II, Lines 938 – 984

Certainly one of the most publicly used poetical works in the Western canon is *The Aeneid*, the epic written by the preeminent poet of Classical Roman literature, Virgil. While inspired by the epics of Homer, Virgil, intended his, from its conception, to buttress the Roman Empire, newly established by the emperor Augustus, in its cultural identity.

The Aeneid was thus much more than the revival of a Greek myth; it was an epic of Rome, and like that of Ennius, brought its action down to the present. ... Whereas Homer is concerned with only a personal fate, Virgil introduces into the epic a theme of national, even world-shaking importance, ... this religious view of Aeneas' mysterious vocation and Rome's function in the world.¹

The excerpt I have chosen from *The Aeneid*, lines 938–984 from Book II (see Appendix A), wherein Aeneas, after his many travels, is recounting to the Carthaginian queen, Dido, the night of his flight from Troy as it met its destruction, begins with the image of a “shooting star, its trail a torch of flooding light.”² It follows and confirms the preceding image of a “little flamentip” that had just hovered over the head of Iulius, Aeneas' son. Aeneas and his father read it as an omen, and so too, could Virgil's readers, as a symbol of Rome's own manifest destiny to rise and rule. It reinforces the blazing words of Jupiter from Book I, consoling his daughter Venus, who had come to him, fearing the fate of her half-divine Trojan son, Aeneas. Jupiter foretells Aeneas' future rule, his descendants, and the building of Rome by the Romans,

¹ N.G.L. Hammond and H.H. Scullard, *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1970), 1126 -1127.

² Virgil and Allen Mandelbaum, *The Aeneid of Virgil* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), lines 940 – 941.

culminating in his decree, “I set no limits to their fortunes and / no time; I give them empire without end.”³

Empire is a word that immediately evokes political inclinations, either for or against; and these inclinations come into play, from its earliest readership to now. Indeed, as the critic Charles Martindale writes: “The political significance of the poem remains at the centre of much current discussion. Are the poems firmly pro-Augustan, or are they in some sense a critique of empire and emperor? And if Virgil wrote in support of an autocratic regime, does this compromise the value of those writings?”⁴ Martindale discusses the critical reception over time, noting the essay of Adam Parry who “argued for a division, within the *Aeneid*, between a public voice celebrating Roman achievement and a private voice of mourning.”⁵ This view of a merged public and private voice provides a base for considering the five approaches to public use previously sketched. But as another consideration of the political import of Virgil’s work, one of his most recent translators, Sarah Ruden, has this to add, as noted below,

Have human beings ever had a choice about struggling for land, livelihood, and security for the next generation? ... The tragedies and failures he depicts come mainly from characters being alive and belonging to society. There is no divine pontification, as in Homer, about mortals willfully making life worse for themselves.⁶

That the characters are alive and belong to society is fully on display in this excerpt. And if Plato wished for epic poetry to be a means of moral education, to inculcate the specific cultural values of piety and courage that he found undermined by Homer, it seems that Virgil, in this

³ Virgil and Mandelbaum, lines 389 – 390.

⁴ Charles Martindale, Introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Virgil* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 10.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶ Sarah Ruden, Preface to *The Aeneid*, Virgil and Sarah Ruden (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), xi.

scene, aptly responds to this wish. But Virgil's Aeneas embodies a more expansive notion of piety than that held by the Greeks or contemporary readers: his epithet, "pious Aeneas" summarizes the Roman value of pietas, which enlarged the notion of reverence to a sense of belonging in its fullest reach.

Still, this passage is replete with displays of reverence to the gods. Among them is Aeneas's father, Anchises, who had been unwilling to leave his burning city and home, accepting the omen of the shooting star. Another is Aeneas telling the household servants who will join them in fleeing to meet near "an ancient shrine of Ceres, and nearby / an ancient cypress stands, one that our fathers' devotion kept alive for many years."⁷ Finally, Aeneas asks his father to carry "the holy vessels and our homeland's gods. / Filthy with war, just come from slaughter, I must never touch these sacred things until / I bathe myself within a running stream."⁸ These are more Homeric, and even contemporary, displays of piety.

But the most striking image of this passage is that of Aeneas taking his elderly father upon his shoulders, to carry him out of his burning home and destroyed homeland. It has become a prototypical image of a son's loyal and loving devotion, one that continues to reverberate through literature. Consider this scene in all of its resonance: Aeneas father, Anchises, now elderly and infirm, is part of Troy's glorious past. In a scene to come, he will be recalled as a great visiting warrior by the Arcadian king Evander, Aeneas' future ally in the fight to claim Italy as a home for his people. In Book VI, during Aeneas' memorable and moving visit to the Underworld, Anchises will show Aeneas the future generations to be born of his grandson, the

⁷ Virgil and Mandelbaum, lines 966 – 967.

⁸ Ibid., 970 – 973.

young Iulius. Iulius, as the reader sees him here, is both a child in exile clinging to his father's hand, and the nascent, fragile future of the empire. The pietas that Aeneas embodies here has both horizontal and vertical implications: obligations within his own life and culture, as well as to the past, present and future.

As this fuller image of pietas, Aeneas embraces “the obligations he has to members of his family, to his fellow citizens and to the gods of his tribe. ... In sacrificing his individual self to the widening collectivity of needs and duties and emotions he becomes more than himself, he becomes the incarnation of his family, his tribe, and his nation.”⁹ Pietas can be seen as civic engagement at its noblest, but it “is not a virtue confined to Aeneas; it is also an ideal for all Romans...(who) had a profound sense of national unity.”¹⁰ This, then, is Virgil's public and didactic side, envisaging an empire founded upon the shoulders of such a hero.

But neither the author nor his creation becomes a stock civic mouthpiece; Virgil's Aeneas is too richly shaded with emotion to be other than recognizably human despite his half-divine parentage and his heroic destiny. As mentioned by Parry, there is the private voice of Virgil, and it is seen in the range of feelings this dutiful hero manifests, providing an emotional education for its readers past and present. The critic W. R. Johnson notes about the inner dimension of pietas that “it also suggests, more subtly, the affection or sympathy (we get ‘pity’ as well as pious from pius) that a person is likely to have for those, whether mortal or immortal, with whom his life is linked.”¹¹ The reader sees that pity in Aeneas' concern for the servants as well as his

⁹ W.R. Johnson, Introduction to *The Essential Aeneid*, Virgil and Stanley Lombardo, (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 2006), xviii.

¹⁰ Bernard Knox, Introduction to *The Aeneid*, Virgil and Robert Fagles, Robert, (New York: Viking, 2006), 14.

¹¹ Johnson, xviii.

“fear for son and father” at the conclusion of this excerpt, and again, later, for those countrymen who follow him into exile, for his dispirited shipmates, for the Trojan women who weary of traveling in search of a new homeland.

That pity also brims over into grief over the losses of those with whom he has been and will be linked: his wife, Creusa, separated in the flight from Troy, his later love and necessary abandonment of Dido, the death of his father, the death of the young noble son of an ally. These deep human feelings develop into the anguish that Aeneas feels over war, and even compassion for those native Italian tribes he must conquer to establish Rome as an imperial city. As Johnson further points out, “Aeneas differs from conventional Homeric (or Roman) heroes in his seemingly fundamental aversion to warfare.”¹²

In a remarkable scene near the conclusion of the epic, while in the midst of slaying an enemy’s son, Aeneas sees in “that face / the image of his own devotion to Anchises’ ... [and he is] moved by a curious sense of kinship with the enemy. ... This [is a] peculiar mix of emotions wherein pietas all but finds itself divided against itself.”¹³ This extraordinary passage suggests Virgil’s ambiguity about Roman achievement; the emotions of his hero throughout his voyages and his battles are always a counterweight to any official message, moments where “the poem’s patriotic grandeur conflicts with its more private human face ... when its sense of suffering outweighs its sense of imperial imperative, where Aeneas the human being and Aeneas the progenitor of all-conquering Rome split apart.”¹⁴

¹² Johnson, xx.

¹³ Ibid., xxii.

¹⁴ Ibid., xxx.

This dual vision can be seen as the socio-political sense that speaks as poetry of witness. Virgil was born in 70 BCE, as the Roman Republic was coming to an end and was succeeded by decades of civil war. From his adolescence onward, he was aware of the impact of war upon personal lives and property. His father's own small estate was expropriated when land was distributed to war veterans.¹⁵ But while "each of his major works engages with contemporary political reality in a serious and sustained way, ... yet each also creates the means of preventing Virgil or this poetry from becoming simply a vehicle of political comment."¹⁶ His poetic works reflect the strife of his times, but transform it, if obliquely in the first two. His first collection, "*The Eclogues*" were published "while Rome was still involved in the apparently endless civil wars and social revolutions that had begun about a century earlier. They are vague, charming and unreal ... because [Virgil] and almost all of his friends were sick at heart, exhausted, nearly maddened, by the worst of all wars—civil war."¹⁷ But not so unreal in that the characters in these pastoral poems, shepherds and milkmaids with Greek names, speak of lands appropriated and quote contemporary Roman politicians. Still, they are "poems of escape, from brutal reality into an ideal blended of the real beauties of nature."¹⁸

Virgil's second work, *The Georgics*, again turns from the recent past, "the Roman world [which] had been subjected to shattering disturbance, political, economical and social,"¹⁹ and proposes instead a vision of peace and industry as exemplified by the farmer's life. Ostensibly an

¹⁵ Hammond and Scullard, 1123.

¹⁶ R.J. Tarrant, "Poetry and power: Virgil's poetry in contemporary context," in *The Cambridge Companion to Virgil*, Charles Martindale, ed. (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 173.

¹⁷ Gilbert Highet, *Poets in a Landscape* (New York: New York Review of Books, 1985 Introduction by Michael Putnam, copyright 2010), 64.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁹ J. W. Mackail, *Virgil and His Meaning to the World of Today* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1939), 59.

agricultural manual, it hymns the farmer's world, "which at times appears one of spontaneous abundance and at others of unremitting and potentially futile toil."²⁰ Of special interest is the Fourth Georgic, which is an encomium to the bees: "They live together under the rule of law. ... Knowing that winter is coming, their enterprise is to gather together what they'll have in common"²¹; this could be seen as a model of civic harmony. In a period where agricultural renewal is a national need, Virgil's *Georgics* are acutely aware that "existence itself is fragile in this world ... having to be so carefully and anxiously constructed and maintained by toil and ingenuity and arts."²²

The Aeneid is Virgil's third and final work, and it is unstinting in its recounting of warfare, howsoever often Aeneas will extend his right arm in peace in the attempt to found a new homeland. In this passage, Aeneas has come to his father's house after the Greeks have finally breached the Trojan walls through the stratagem of the great wooden horse, and are slaughtering their enemies; at the house, "the fire roars / across the walls; tide of flame flows nearer."²³ The danger is palpable, and devastation assured. As Johnson has said, this is "an epic about the destruction and resurrection of civilisations. ... Virgil never loses sight of the huge costs of the victory he is praising ... and an unhappy truth of the human condition: recognize[ing] our communities to be fragile, vulnerable, contingent."²⁴ To see *The Aeneid* simply as promoting the virtues of empire is to discount its pity for the exiled and the defeated, and to disregard the

²⁰ Tarrant, "Poetry and Power," 177.

²¹ Virgil and David Ferry, *The Georgics of Virgil*, First edition (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 153.

²² David Ferry, Introduction to *The Georgics of Virgil*, xv.

²³ Virgil and Mandelbaum, lines 954 - 955.

²⁴ Johnson, x.

private voice of Virgil, speaking through Dido, welcoming the exhausted Trojans to her land: “Not ignorant of trials, I now can learn to help the miserable.”²⁵

What knits together these various intentions—advocating pietas, expressing emotion, appealing to compassion—is Virgil’s artistry itself. Literature was his own chosen field to cultivate, and once he was secure under the patronage of noble friends and then Octavian (Augustus) himself, Virgil was freed to immerse himself in it. He and his literary circle in Naples, which had been settled by the Greeks, succumbed to, as Highet states,

the charm of their language, the richness of their culture, the exquisite variety of their art. ... One of the chief aims of their lives was, therefore, to create, in Latin, and for contemporary and future Rome, a literature which should equal that created in Greek for the Greeks of an earlier day.²⁶

After the shorter works of *The Eclogues* and *The Georgics*, Virgil intentionally undertook the more ambitious literary genre, the epic.

As a genre, the Greek epic, as mentioned in Chapter One, had achieved a cultural standing as a general means of education by its ability to transmit a long narrative through its rigorous hexameter form. Virgil wrote in response to Homer, choosing the Trojan Aeneas, briefly glimpsed in *The Iliad*, as his Roman hero. In the first six books, Virgil gives him adventures not unlike those of Odysseus in *The Odyssey*; the last six books are reminiscent of *The Iliad* as Aeneas conquers and creates his new kingdom. Virgil accomplishes his own feat of conquest in his adaptation of the Greek hexameter into the Latin language, an unwelcoming terrain: “it remained to the last a matter of perpetual labour and endless experiment. ... By

²⁵ Virgil and Mandelbaum, 22.

²⁶ Highet, 75.

innumerable verbal or syntactical devices, he made a stubborn material flexible and supple: he gave the language a new music.”²⁷

The effect of this new music was immediate success: “Many Romans when listening to or reading Virgil may have paid more attention to the sound and beauty of the language than to what was being said.”²⁸ Those of us unable to read the Latin must rely on the judgment of others, such as the translator Sarah Ruden, quoted earlier, who admiringly states, “The vocabulary is plain and powerful, the word order is extremely artful yet manages to enhance the power of the word.”²⁹ The Latinist J.W. Mackail offers his unqualified opinion that Virgil shows “what perfect expression is, as having achieved the utmost beauty, melody, and significance, of which human words seem to be capable.”³⁰

This perfect expression, though, can also be seen to have political uses, and the critic James O’Hara sums up conflicting views as below:

the orderliness and ‘classical’ attention to proportion both reflect and endorse the order now being imposed upon the Roman world by Augustus. ... The other claim is that the melancholy style of the *Georgics* and the *Aeneid* directs sympathy away from values a more tone-deaf reading would find central and dominant.³¹

O’Hara goes on to stress Virgil’s many “stylistic features’ potential for producing an emotional response.”³² The translator Ruden, again, has her “lowland view of the great controversy about

²⁷ Mackail, 146.

²⁸ James J. O’Hara, “Virgil’s Style,” *The Cambridge Companion to Virgil*, Charles Martindale, ed. (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 246.

²⁹ Sarah Ruden, Preface to *The Aeneid*, Virgil and Sarah Ruden (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), vii.

³⁰ Mackail, 7.

³¹ O’Hara, 246 -247.

³² *Ibid.*, 254.

Virgil's real attitude toward Roman imperialism: I think it was somewhat like his attitude toward poetry: conquest, settlement, composition, done in ways that make the results last."³³ The results have lasted.

The artistry as much as the message of the *Aeneid* ensured its immediate acceptance into the Roman literary canon; as mentioned previously, the esthetic pleasure was foremost for some of its first audience, while Augustus and his court were pleased by its heroic content. The *Aeneid* served its Roman public well, propagating the cultural and civic value of pietas, this multi-dimensional sense of belonging, of a self that existed only in its relation to all. It wove together a society and undergirded imperial expansion. But Virgil's private concern for pity and its sublime expression have fortified readers and writers in successive generations. "We can document how for 2000 years quotations of Virgil have provided solace or inspiration or material for reflection."³⁴ The blazing omen that appears at the beginning of the passage I've discussed above, persuading Anchises and confirming Aeneas, could well signify Virgil's own illuminating and lasting voice.

³³ Ruden, xi.

³⁴ Martindale, 17.

Chapter Three

Dante: An Italian poet of wholeness and belonging *Inferno*, Canto III, Lines 22- 69

Just as Virgil wrote in response to Homer, Virgil's own work found a most receptive reader in Dante Alighieri, who conceived his own epic poem, *La Commedia*, after his discovery of the Roman author's *Aeneid*. Other classic works were slowly being introduced in the 13th century, but, as Ernst Robert Curtius describes: "the awakening of Virgil by Dante is an arc of flame which leaps from one great soul to another. The tradition of the European spirit knows no situation of such affecting loftiness, tenderness, fruitfulness. It is the meeting of the two greatest Latins."¹ It was a literary encounter that produced another monument in the Western canon, and one that both acknowledges its debt to, and perhaps surpasses, its inspiration. Dante wrote beyond a vision of empire into the Empyrean, God's eternal realm, and how an individual soul entered it.

As the translator Robert Hollander has pointed out, Dante availed himself of Virgil's example for his own crucial "poetic strategies in the Comedy: to write a poem that prominently features a visit to the underworld, ... that celebrates the Roman concept of political order as exemplified in the empire, and that is narrated by a poet who has been granted prophetic powers."² Dante, like Virgil, merges a public and private voice, but even more so, being both the narrator of and the protagonist in the poem, Dante the pilgrim. He fully intended his epic to reach as wide a readership as possible, so he writes

¹ Robert Hollander, *Dante: a Life in Works* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001) 114.

² *Ibid.*, 115.

in his own Florentine dialect, rather than Latin, a point to which we will return. His ambition is huge, as the critic Prudence Shaw reminds us: “The *Commedia* is precisely for changing the world. ... The poet writes ‘for the benefit of the world which lives badly’”³

This judgment of Dante is seen clearly from the beginning of his epic, even before his descent into the underworld with its vivid pageant of sinners. In this excerpt from Canto III of *Inferno*, lines 22 -69 (see Appendix B), the shade of Virgil and Dante pass a crowd of souls while making their way to the ferryman, Charon, who brings the dead to their eternal place of damnation. Here in this ante-chamber, in this numberless crowd, no one speaks or is named, though all wail. As Dante descends farther into the circles of Hell, he will meet many garrulous sinners, whose names he will know, and with whom he will have spirited conversations. But in this curious netherworld, these souls are a largely undistinguishable mass; Virgil describes them as “the sorry souls of those / who lived without disgrace and without praise. ... The world will let no fame of theirs endure; both justice and compassion must disdain them.”⁴

Virgil’s pronouncement about justice and compassion can be seen as an apt and concise summary of the whole moral education proposed by Dante’s *Commedia*. As Hollander says, Dante takes on “the responsibility of showing that all that is found in this world and in the next is measured by justice. Everything in God is just ... the central

³ Prue Shaw, *Reading Dante: From Here to Eternity*, First edition (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2014), 42.

⁴ Dante Alighieri, Allen Mandelbaum, Allen and Barry Moser, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: a verse translation with introd. and commentary* (Quality Paperback Book Club edition reprinted by permission of Bantam Books, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980) lines 36 - 49.

concern of the poem in a single word, *justice*.”⁵ Grounded in theology, Dante categorizes sin from its least serious to its most venal: “Hell is essentially defined by three degrees of sinfulness (Incontinence, Violence, and Fraud). ... Purgatory, the most clearly organized, features seven terraces that purify the seven capital vices [Pride, Envy, Wrath, Sloth, Avarice (along with Prodigality) Gluttony, and Lust.]”⁶ Accordingly, punishment or penitence is merited at each sinful state of being, and devised with an ingenious appropriateness that has enthralled believers and non-believers alike. As a Catholic, Dante’s urgent concern is to persuade his audience, “that man’s will is free, that he can consciously exercise choice, and that his choice can be decisive to all eternity.”⁷

This detailed vision of the afterworld gives the poem its structure; still, it is a poem, and even though an allegory, it is not a dogmatic sermon. The Circles of Hell and the Terraces of Purgatory are inhabited by “individuals whose emotions and moral predicaments are tangible and compelling. ... Their interchanges with Dante are full of drama, ... the whole range of human feelings in their raw power and endless variety.”⁸ Even the blessed souls who achieve the realm of *Paradiso* are not ethereal abstractions, but real people “experiencing the fruition of their virtues.”⁹ Foremost among them, of course, is Beatrice, the childhood and lifelong love of Dante, who, after long meditations on the meaning of her early death, transformed her, in her afterlife, as “the sense and

⁵ Hollander, 106.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁷ Dorothy Sayers, Introduction to Dante Alighieri and Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Comedy of Dante Alighieri, the Florentine.*, Cantica 1 Hell (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1949), 11.

⁸ Shaw, xiv.

⁹ Sayers, 13.

magnet of the poem,”¹⁰ as W.S. Merwin says. The emotions experienced by the souls and Dante the pilgrim and, by extension, the reader serve to intensify the moral message. Just in the *Inferno* alone, “Dante’s reactions range from compassion to aggression, from respect to contempt, from curiosity to revulsion, from pity to pitilessness. . . . Dante’s journey through Hell is a discovery of how deeply intertwined good and evil can be, in ourselves as well as in others, and how difficult and painful it is for any human being to reach, without proper guidance . . . any kind of moral clarity.”¹¹ Dante’s poem intends to provide such guidance as a narrator, and to relay that fellow feeling as a pilgrim.

But returning to this scene, there is a further dimension of emotional education to consider. Those being excluded here from the reach of the poem’s concerns—justice and compassion—are given various descriptive appellations by their translators: Dorothy Sayers calls them “the Futile;” Seamus Heaney, “the useless crew;” Robert Pinsky, “hapless ones.” Allan Mandelbaum chooses “the Lukewarm,” and cites the scalding words from Revelation, “Because you are lukewarm and neither cold nor hot, I shall begin to vomit you from my mouth.”¹² Dante recognizes a few in the crowd, and even “the shade of him / who made, through cowardice, the great refusal”¹³ (thought to be a reference to Pope Celestine V, whose abdication ushered in Pope Boniface VIII, “Dante’s

¹⁰ W.S. Merwin, Foreword to *Purgatorio*, Dante Alighieri and W.S. Merwin (New York: Knopf, 2000), vii.

¹¹ Lino Pertile, “Introduction to *Inferno*,” *The Cambridge Companion to Dante* 2nd ed., Rachel Jacoff, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 76.

¹² Dante Alighieri and Allen Mandelbaum, *The Divine Comedy*, Everyman’s Library (New York: Knopf, 1995), 549.

¹³ Dante Alighieri, Allen Mandelbaum, Allen and Barry Moser, line 59.

archvillain”¹⁴). He understands that this woeful gathering are those “who never were alive.”¹⁵ Their companions are the coward angels who could neither follow Satan in his rebellion nor stay faithful to God, and were rejected both by Heaven and Hell.

Dante underscores this grievous state of noncommittal, of indeterminacy by devising a punishment for these souls that is to perpetually race after a banner that is in perpetual movement, a constant reminder of having taken no stand in life. In addition to this mindless frenzy, the cowardly are subjected to the incessant stings of wasps and horseflies. There will be worse punishments to be witnessed by Dante and Virgil as they descend into Hell, but these are harsh enough to make a very illustrative point. As Sayers asserts below:

Heaven and Hell being states in which choice is permanently fixed, there must also be a state in which the refusal of choice is itself fixed, since to refuse choice is to choose indecision. ... The spirits rush aimlessly after the aimlessly whirling banner, stung and goaded ... by the thought that, in doing anything definite whatsoever, they are missing doing something else.¹⁶

One can understand how Dante, who was fiercely involved in the political factions of 13th-century Florence, at an enormous personal cost, scorns those who took no side at all. But to realize here how deeply and personally offensive these coward souls are to Dante is an emphatic lesson in itself. As Erich Auerbach astutely notes, “the intensity of Dante’s contempt is for those who were neither hot nor cold. ... The violence of Dante’s tone when he speaks of them reveals the very personal bias of a man who was passionate, fearless, and indomitable in his espousal of the good, and for whom active

¹⁴ Shaw, xxvii.

¹⁵ Dante Alighieri, Allen Mandelbaum, Allen and Barry Moser, line 64.

¹⁶ Sayers, *Cantica* 1 Hell, 89.

struggle was the natural form of life.”¹⁷ Dante’s own life stands in disparagement of this nameless, numberless mass; this scene, placed strategically at the beginning, is a stinging rebuke of the refusal to commit, to take a stand.

Auerbach, again, contrasts the souls of those who Dante will meet in their afterlife; whether for good or for ill, “they are human beings who appear in the *Comedy* in the time and place of their perfect actuality ... their ultimate self-realization, where their essence is fulfilled and made manifest for ever.”¹⁸ Dante will encounter so many vehemently individual, almost sympathetic sinners as he and Virgil proceed through the *Inferno* that these indistinguishable ones in the ante-chamber are somehow worse. “In a way they are inferior to the lowest category of sinners, who at least were men, doing good or evil in a human way, while these, the slothful and the lukewarm ‘never lived.’”¹⁹ Dante himself, as the biographer, R.W.B. Lewis describes, “was an ardent personality.”²⁰ Ardor, as an emotional component of morality, is thrown into relief here by the punishment of its absolute opposite, apathy. Dante’s eloquent chastisement of it has reverberated through the centuries. As Prudence Shaw reminds us, that there continue to be “a vast number of souls guilty of this fatal moral indifference is captured in the line echoed by T. S. Eliot, ‘I had not thought death had undone so many.’”²¹

¹⁷ Erich Auerbach, *Dante, Poet of the Secular World* (New York: New York Review Books, 2007) 110.

¹⁸ Auerbach, 90.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 110.

²⁰ R.W.B. Lewis, *Dante* (New York: Lipper/Penguin, 2001) 2.

²¹ Shaw, 196.

Dante's ardor is intrinsic to his identity as a Florentine, and his feeling seems something like an intense, locally specific version of the Roman value of *pietas*. Lewis describes how "Dante associated himself with his native city to a degree almost incomprehensible in modern times. ... It was the very context of his being."²²

This sense of civic connection gives further understanding to Dante's scorn for the indifferent and apathetic: these cowardly souls embody the antithesis of belonging.

Dante's ardor aligned with his conviction "that Florence was the ideal city-state, which is to say, the ideal human habitat. ... The *citta* was the place where men and women could properly live and thrive. ... *Citta* in its richest meaning was a term of utmost value for Dante."²³

Thus, being on the losing side of the internecine feuds of the Guelphs and Ghibellines, and subsequently banished for life from his family and Florence, was both a devastating political failure and personal crisis. But it did afford Dante the perspective and the time to recreate himself and his ambition. And while his *Commedia* is read, rightfully, as a religious poem, an allegory of a soul's journey to God, it is as much a work of political witness. As Hollander says, "Politics are everywhere in the poem, which is far from being the purely religious text some readers take it to be."²⁴ For Dante, the political and the religious worlds were interwoven, as within his identity were the poet, the Catholic and political theorist. Suffering this personal crucible, as critic John Najemy summarizes, "becomes the necessary precondition for the vision of political and moral

²² Lewis, 2.

²³ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁴ Hollander, 6.

redemption entrusted to him for the benefit of humankind. ... In place of what he now sees as the selfish particularism of the city, the poet affirms the universalism of the empire.”²⁵

But he has much to say about the particular Florentines within and without the city walls, and most of it denunciatory: “directed against its upper class of large, rich, politically influential families, the class that led the city into two tragic periods of civil conflict, ... which brought suffering to every Florentine household.”²⁶ Shaw readily sees him as the poet engage: “He wants a better world for the poor and powerless, whose lives are made wretched by the greed, warfare, civil unrest. ... His calling to account those responsible is as powerful a political statement as any.”²⁷

Consequently, Virgil’s imperial message held no ambiguity for Dante; rather he embraces it as a political solution for his own warring city and continent. Dante holds out hope for a new “Augustus” whose orderly reign would enable the flourishing of individual Christian lives. Though his hopes were not realized historically, they were sustained in his writing right to the final canticle of his *Commedia*, the *Paradiso*, with Dante, simultaneously the pilgrim and the narrator, beholding an image of an Eagle “symbolizing both divine and Roman justice.”²⁸

²⁵ John M. Najemy, “Dante and Florence,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, 2nd ed. Rachel Jacoff, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 238.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 243.

²⁷ Shaw, 61.

²⁸ Dante Alighieri, Dorothy L. Sayers, and Barbara Reynolds, *The Comedy of Dante Alighieri, the Florentine*, Cantica III Paradise (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1962), 101.

The weaving of such a journey in verse—from the ante-chamber of Hell to the final blissful vision of God—bespeaks Dante’s artistic mastery. For this most publicly intended work, he chose to write, as mentioned, in his own Florentine dialect. As Sayers makes plain below:

He wanted every intelligent person in Italy to read it, for, as he had pointed out, some time before in the *Convivio*, ‘there are many people with excellent minds, . . . not only men but women, of which men and women alike there are many of this (i.e., Italian) tongue, who can use the vernacular but have no Latin.’ He wrote his *Comedy*, then, for the “common reader.”²⁹

And, just as the ancient epics provided an educational foundation, so, too, Dante’s *Commedia* encompassed more than its systematic theological framework, or its caustic political reckoning: It was a compendium of knowledge of the time. Readers of allegorical poetry in that era, as Sayers notes, were quite used to “verse as the medium for instruction, demonstration, and argument, and in that medium to handle morals, philosophy, science or any other material belonging to human experience.”³⁰

It is Dante’s singular genius to have devised a poetic form capable of bearing such rich content while maintaining the lively narrative: the terza rima, three lines making up a tercet, linked by the many rhymes inherent in the Italian language, using a pattern of ABA BCB CDC. He both profits from and expands “the vernacular speech of his native Florence in all its rich multifariousness of linguistic register.”³¹ It is widely accepted that Dante used this form for its theological significance: “the symbolic reference to the Holy

²⁹ Dorothy L. Sayers, Introduction to *The Comedy of Dante Alighieri, the Florentine*, Cantica I Hell, Dante Alighieri and Dorothy L. Sayers (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1949), 49.

³⁰ Sayers, Dorothy, Introduction to *The Comedy of Dante Alighieri, the Florentine*, Cantica II Purgatory, Dante Alighieri and Dorothy L. Sayers (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1955), 12.

³¹ Shaw, 39.

Trinity is obvious.”³² But beyond that sacred allusion, there is the innate muscular music that the three lines of the rhyme provide: echoing, linking, foretelling. The poet and translator Robert Pinsky is acutely aware of this relation, saying, “Though we call it a form, verse is physical, and in this sense the sounds of a poem are its body. By devising terza rima as the body of a poem about souls and bodies, Dante added an expressive element as well as a kind of movement.”³³ The poem has a body in time, and it endures over time, and it bears the voice of Dante the narrator and the vision of Dante the pilgrim forward until both merge in the sight of God. The poet would have his readers have that glimpse alongside of him, to guide their own mortal journey.

Dante is credited with coining “some 30 per cent of Italian words”³⁴ and one of his that has not found an English equivalent is “trasumanar,” which Mandelbaum renders as “passing beyond the human;”³⁵ this seems the best description of what the *Commedia* achieves. And yet Dante’s poem is utterly concerned with “what it is to be a human being, and the place of the individual in society and in the cosmos.”³⁶

So, too, is Virgil’s *Aeneid*. They both write their epics out of specific cultural contexts, out of times and worldviews long displaced, but both give us the vision of the individual self belonging to, and made whole by its relation to the greater good, as conceived by

³² O.B. Hardison, Alex Preminger, and Frank J. Warnke, *The Princeton Handbook of Poetic Terms* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1986), 278.

³³ Robert Pinsky, Translator’s Note to *The Inferno of Dante : a new verse translation* Dante Alighieri, Robert Pinsky, and Nicole Pinsky, Illustrated by Michael Mazur (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994) xxii

³⁴ A. N. Wilson, *Dante in Love* (London: Atlantic Books, 2011), 219.

³⁵ Dante Alighieri and Allen Mandelbaum, *The Divine Comedy*, (Everyman’s Library, New York: Knopf, 1995) 381.

³⁶ Shaw, 2.

each poet. Singing of wholeness and belonging, these poems continue to have their audience, their public use.

Chapter Four

William Wordsworth, advocate of the individual lyric and humanity transformed by nature “Composed Upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802” (see Appendix C)

The sonnet composed by our next poet, William Wordsworth, may seem a much more modest public effort after considering the national and cultural epics of Virgil and Dante, but it is also something of a progression: from empire to the Empyrean, and now back to Earth. Wordsworth’s range is both intimate and grand, and within the sonnet’s compact form are tautly woven the strands of moral education, rectifying emotion, socio-political consciousness, artistic affirmation, and inclusivity that address its public, then and now.

Wordsworth studied Italian while at Cambridge; and while Dante seems not to have been an enkindling flame at the time, his later writings show his familiarity with Dante’s prose works as well as with the *Commedia*.¹ Virgil, on the other hand, was an early and natural interest; as Duncan Wu has shown, “Wordsworth seems to have found it difficult to begin writing at Cambridge. ... He turned to translation as a vehicle for his talents. Virgil’s account of Orpheus and Eurydice would have had obvious appeal.”² Wu further describes Wordsworth’s early endeavors: “The Virgilian translations ... [show] he is already aware of the effectiveness of tautology [repetition] as a means of expressing an emotional intensity found jointly in nature and the bereaved Orpheus.”³ So Wordsworth

¹ Luzzi, Joseph. *Romantic Europe and the Ghost of Italy* (New Haven: Yale, 2017), 143- 144.

² Duncan Wu, *Wordsworth : an Inner Life* (Oxford, U.K.: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 25.

³ *Ibid.*, 26.

early on found in Virgil some of his own private concerns of emotional intensity and nature; later he shared Dante's public ambition to reach and reform his society and his era. And like these two masters, he did write an epic, his thirteen-book, autobiographical poem, *The Prelude; or, Growth of a Poet's Mind*, which, however, was not published until the year of his death, 1850.

The Prelude stands as the greatest of Wordsworth's poetical works, and "as the first example of what has since become a major genre: the account of the growth of an individual mind to artistic maturity, and of the sources of its creative powers."⁴

It began as a private investigation, and continued as such, but Wordsworth came to believe that it could serve as a prelude to the long, discursive philosophical poem that he and his fellow poet, Samuel T. Coleridge, envisioned and discussed from the beginning of their mutually fruitful *annus mirabilis* of 1787 and onward.

Simultaneously, though, Wordsworth, with and through the intense friendship with Coleridge, maintained his public role as a lyric poet and critic: "Both men were united in commitment to a high idea of poetry as a beneficent agent, but were convinced its vigour needed to be renewed and that its power more than ever needed to be reasserted."⁵ Wordsworth launched his critical manifesto, "*Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*," with the second edition of their combined works in 1800. The sonnet "Composed Upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802", carries out the *Preface's*

⁴ M.H. Abrams, Stephen Gill, and Jonathan Wordsworth, *Preface to The Prelude, 1799, 1805, 1850: Authoritative Texts, Context and Reception, Recent Critical Essays*, by William Wordsworth, 1st ed. (New York: Norton, 1979), ix.

⁵ Stephen Gill, Introduction to *William Wordsworth: 21st-Century Authors* by William Wordsworth and Stephen Gill (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2012), xvii.

prescription of using simplified diction and what might be seen as an ordinary subject, treated with “a certain colouring of imagination”⁶ so that its readers’ understanding “must necessarily be in some degree enlightened and his affections ameliorated.”⁷

The moral lesson to be gleaned here, meant to enlighten the understanding of its readers, then and now, comes from meditating upon the relation between nature and humanity. Wordsworth’s view of nature is much more complicated than the simple description of him as a “nature poet” implies: “Wordsworth’s feeling for nature—‘The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul / Of all my moral being’—was never simply or even mainly a delight of the senses.”⁸ It is a whole and holistic philosophy that developed over time, from his rapturous childhood rambles; his immersion, after the return from France, in a period of despair and confusion; and culminating in the conscious embrace that will be summarized by the title of *The Prelude*’s Book Eighth, to be written in autumn 1804, “Retrospect—Love of Nature Leading to Love of Man.”⁹ Steadfast throughout is Wordsworth’s conviction “that love of nature’s ‘beauteous and majestic’ scenes (*Prelude* 1 636) was inseparable from, in a mysterious but absolutely certain way, moral growth, knowledge of the divine, and acceptance of the nature of human life.”¹⁰

⁶ William Wordsworth, “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*,” Wordsworth, William and Gill, Stephen. *William Wordsworth: 21st-Century Authors* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2012), 59.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁸ Ronald Gaskell, *Wordsworth’s Poem of the Mind* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1991), 2.

⁹ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude, 1799, 1805, 1850: Authoritative Texts, Context and Reception, Recent Critical Essays*, 1st ed. M.H. Abrams, Stephen Gill, and Jonathan Wordsworth, eds. (New York: Norton, 1979), 268 -269

¹⁰ Stephen Gill, “The philosophic poet,” Stephen Gill, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Wordsworth*. (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 147.

This sonnet about London begins with the fundamental solidity of Nature: Earth. It is a grounding that any individual can find familiar. Yet there is an immediate call to awaken a spiritual sense, to recognize the owning of a soul, and to use it to engage and perceive as fully as possible. Wordsworth transforms this urban setting into a pastoral vision: he sees the beauty of the morning as an ennobling capacity of nature, hallowing the many undertakings and efforts of mankind—the ships and many buildings—and also providing a sustaining rest from all of their labors and activity. The poem embodies a meditative pause, during which, simply and effectively, Wordsworth is seeking to “enable his readers better to enjoy or endure life ... by teaching them to look at and dwell in the natural world.”¹¹ This lesson, of being able to ground oneself by recourse to the natural world, even in the midst of the great metropolis, would only grow in importance as urbanization increased.

Wordsworth and Coleridge shared a steady and exultant reliance upon nature during the earliest and most productive period of their friendship. To his fellow poet’s own deep feeling for nature since childhood, Coleridge brought his ardent belief in Unitarianism, which held “that God is present in the natural world as a pervasive life-force.”¹² Together they conceived a philosophic view of Nature as One Life, seeing the spiritual through, in and throughout the natural world, a stance somewhere between pantheism and Deism. But this mutual understanding lessened as the poets’ vocations and

¹¹ Jonathan Bate, *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1991), 4.

¹² Wordsworth, Jonathan, intro to *The Pedlar, Tintern Abbey, The Two-Part Prelude, William Wordsworth*, by William Wordsworth, and Jonathan Wordsworth (Cambridge, Cambridgeshire, Cambridge University Press, 1985), 2.

temperaments diverged: “ Wordsworth in the spring of 1798 seems to have believed in the One Life, not indeed without moments of doubt, but with a passionate conviction he never quite felt again.”¹³

Wordsworth’s view of nature evolved as he spent time in London, and meditated on his time in France during the French Revolution. As the critic Jonathan Bate describes, “It was only when he went to the city that he fully and consciously apprehended his debt to nature, and in particular how his sense of human brotherhood came from his early encounters with Lakeland shepherds.”¹⁴

Bate goes on to show how Wordsworth’s thinking plays out in books seven to nine of *The Prelude*: “as a progression from alienation in the city through love of nature to the recognition of individual human love and tenderness in the city to the general love of humanity in the revolutionary spirit.”¹⁵ Bate further draws a contrast between Wordsworth’s sense of the social order with that of Edmund Burke, as sketched in his *Reflections* on the French Revolution.

Where the latter has local community, country and mankind, Wordsworth has nature, local community and mankind. ... The politics of Grasmere vale (his local community) are ultimately based on a relationship to the environment, a marriage of humankind to the natural world.¹⁶

This sonnet, seeing London at rest, conveys a harmonious vision of that marriage, with the industry of mankind held within the frame of nature.

¹³ Gaskell, p. 22.

¹⁴ Bate, 21.

¹⁵ Ibid., 32.

¹⁶ Bate, 33.

The theory that the Love of Nature leads naturally to the Love of Humanity, and its earlier, less developed iteration of One Life, was not the sort of coherent philosophical system that Coleridge imagined that Wordsworth could and would create. But Wordsworth's moral lesson delivered in the published individual lyric poems and later posthumously in *The Prelude* was not without its power to impress and persuade its public, among them, the Victorian John Stuart Mill, who took from his reading that "the beauty, stability, and endurance of nature are necessary prerequisites for human social and psychological well-being."¹⁷

Moreover, Wordsworth, in his *Preface*, expressly asserts the superiority of poetry as a public medium over philosophical systems or political pamphlets, believing, as Gill summarizes: "This most philosophic of all writing carries 'Truth alive into the heart by passion.'... All attempts 'formally & systematically (to) lay down rules for the actions of Man' are misguided, because they cannot reach the human heart."¹⁸ This London scene is clearly meant to reach the heart. As with Virgil and Dante, the moral and the emotional components of Wordsworth's poetic voice are intertwined, and reinforce each other. His delight in the morning, his responsiveness to nature is an emotional lesson in itself, and is thrown into relief by its urban setting. But there is more to be felt: the City's majesty and might elicits awe; its stillness rivals any natural splendor, and the observer is touched—moved—to a perspective outside of a day-to-day immersion in its busyness.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Gill, "The philosophic poet," 155.

The awe induces a calm in the human heart, so profound it becomes repose, or as the title suggests, a state of being composed.

It is not necessary to know that at this time the Treaty of Amiens (1802) had brought temporary peace between England and France, and Wordsworth had been able to travel to Calais, in August, to meet Annette Vallon, the French woman with whom he had a year-long relationship in 1792, and their daughter, Caroline, after a decade of separation while their native lands were at war. But to have this piece of biographical information is to understand, perhaps, how Wordsworth knew first hand that “so many forces in wartime Britain were combining to ‘blunt the discriminating powers of the mind’”¹⁹ as he put it in his *Preface*. His manifesto for a poetry “which would be quietly attentive to the fundamentals of human life” is exemplified in his own credible voice. As the poet Seamus Heaney said, “One of the reasons Wordsworth’s poems communicate such an impression of wholeness and depth is that they arrived as the hard-earned reward of resolved crisis. The steady emotional keel beneath them has known tempestuous conditions.”²⁰ The emotion here is peace, both personal and public; howsoever temporary, it is a real moment of respite.

But Heaney calls rightful attention to Wordsworth’s “conflicting awareness of a necessity to attend to ‘the calm that nature breathes’ and a responsibility to confront the grievous face of ‘what man has made of man,’ his double bind between politics and

¹⁹ Stephen Gill, Introduction to *William Wordsworth: 21st-Century Authors* by William Wordsworth and Stephen Gill (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2012), xviii.

²⁰ Seamus Heaney, Introduction to *The Essential Wordsworth* 1st ed. William Wordsworth, and Seamus Heaney, (New York: Ecco Press, 1988), 5.

transcendence, morality and mysticism, suffering and song.”²¹ And though this London view is “smokeless,” its observer is very much aware of all of the industrial, economic, social, and political upheavals that have been and continue to be underway in just the past decade. While this sonnet seemingly bears no political witness, there is another sonnet from the same period, *September 1st, 1802*, which gives us the double bind of which Heaney writes. In this lyric, Wordsworth speaks of a fellow passenger, a negro woman now outcast from France by Napoleon’s decree. It recalls the earlier works of Wordsworth, where he writes of the poor, the elderly, grieving mothers, an exhausted and numbed soldier; in short, the marginalized and the outcasts, those who had never been deemed worthy subjects of the conventional, contemporary poetry. Wordsworth’s *Preface*, defending the choice of “incidents and situations from common life ... low and rustic life”²² is a literary translation of the egalitarian spirit he imbibed during his time in France, and continued to profess.

Wordsworth’s first trip to France had been a walking tour with his college friend in 1790, the year after the fall of the Bastille, when the country was full of public celebration, which he later evoked in *The Prelude*: “Twas a time when Europe was rejoiced. / France standing on the top of golden hours. / And human nature seeming born again.”²³ On his second trip a year later he not only became involved with Vallon, but also came under the influence of an army officer, Michel Beaupuy, who embodied for the twenty-two-year-old poet the ideals of the Revolution. It was Beaupuy who, when they

²¹ Seamus Heaney, Introduction to *The Essential Wordsworth*, 9.

²² *Ibid.*, 78.

²³ Stephen Gill, *William Wordsworth: a Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 59.

once encountered “a hunger-bitten girl,” gestured towards her, saying “’Tis against that / Which we are fighting;”²⁴ a memorable incident that would be recounted in *The Prelude*. Not long after, Wordsworth returned to London to seek income just as the Revolution turned to its period of violence; with the execution of Louis XVI, England and France were soon at war, leaving him separated from Vallon and despairing in his native country.

But he keeps faith with his revolutionary fervor, transmuting it, as we have seen, into a poetics of moral and political import. The critic David Bromwich singles out his poem ‘The Old Cumberland Beggar’ as an example of “the truth that Wordsworth was put into the world to show ... (the suspension of) the rational conception of a person, a plan of life, a social context ... (for the) presence of something simply and radically human.”²⁵ Bromwich develops this further: “If a name is wanted for the principle that compelled his thinking, I suggest we call it a sense of radical humanity...”²⁶ He believes Wordsworth’s writing about such marginalized figures speaks “of mere attention as an ethical act—attention in a sense that precedes reflection or solidarity.”²⁷ But because the poems reach us emotionally, they can and do create feelings of solidarity.

And here is where poetic technique again, as with Virgil and Dante, binds together the moral, emotional, socio-political values. As mentioned earlier, Wordsworth’s *Preface* put great emphasis on the importance of diction, and the use of “real language”

²⁴ Ibid., 61.

²⁵ David Bromwich, *Disowned by Memory: Wordsworth’s Poetry of the 1790s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 5.

²⁶ Bromwich, 7.

²⁷ Ibid., 15.

as opposed to the “gaudiness and inane phraseology”²⁸ he found in writers of his era. The unfussy clarity of this sonnet’s diction reinforces its impact, as does the sonnet form’s metrical regularity. Wordsworth also believed strongly in the importance of meter, and of carefully maintaining and varying the stresses of a line; the success of which was praised by the Victorian critic Walter Pater, who noted that his “ability to fuse compelling but simple words with metre created a ‘rhythmical power’ with the capacity to act as a kind of ‘sedative’ that at once arouses and regulates our emotional response to the poem.”²⁹ Heaney, too, recognizes the power of Wordsworth’s making of “a music of coming to rest, of understanding. . . . In this entranced state, the casual concerns of the mind, (or) the proper sorrow for (a) wounded life . . . are allayed by apprehensions of a longer, deeper tranquility.”³⁰

Finally, there is the form of the sonnet, which, with Wordsworth’s supple and sublime artistry, becomes an affirmation of an individual lyric voice. This chapter began with suggestion that this much more compact and humble poetic form could not have the reach of the epic, thereby becoming a unifying cultural voice. But as Wordsworth foresaw in his time in London, increasing urbanization would lead to an alienation and anonymity, where, as he says in the Prelude, “The face of every one / That passes me by is a mystery.”³¹ How much more this could be said, of a society atomized by its digital

²⁸ William Wordsworth, “Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*,” *The Essential Wordsworth* 1st ed. William Wordsworth, and Seamus Heaney (New York: Ecco Press, 1988), 76 -77.

²⁹ Emma Mason, *The Cambridge Introduction to William Wordsworth* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 48.

³⁰ Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose, 1968-1978* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1980), 66.

³¹ Bate, 20.

devices. A sonnet, then, has its strength in its ability to “condense moments of heightened consciousness, ‘miniatur[ing]’ the world, as Coleridge put it ‘in order to *manifest* the Truth.’”³² This sonnet allows any reader a stay against anonymity, a foothold in the human and the natural world.

Wordsworth’s works were not widely accepted during the beginning and middle of his long life, but he gradually gained recognition, and with the Victorians, several of whom have been mentioned, he became accepted as the foremost poet of the Romantic era, and the exemplar of the individual lyric. His ethical attention to the dispossessed, and his equal and abiding attention to nature make him a public poet more necessary than ever.

³² Mason, 53.

Chapter Five

Léopold Sédar Senghor: the poet as priest, professor, and statesman *Prayer of the Senegalese Soldiers*

In a span of four or five generations, the next poet under consideration, Léopold Sédar Senghor, is on the cusp of even more profound and accelerated global changes than those faced by Wordsworth. But as with the English Romantic poet, he is responding in poetry, and he similarly believes poetry is capable of changing perceptions. As with the late medievalist poet Dante, he has a vision in which human flourishing is the ultimate goal of political arrangements. And as a French colonial student who excelled in his classical studies, Senghor knew Virgil's imperial epic, the *Aeneid* (and will address Dido in one of the stanzas of his *Elegy of Carthage*). He has, like these canonical poets, a worldview that finds eloquent and passionate expression through his poetic art, but unlike them, he is also able to act on, and achieve some success in, this view through politics. Léopold Sédar Senghor's life and work present a remarkable intermingling of the public use of poetry.

Senghor, who is renowned for his development of the cultural theory of Negritude and for being the first president of Senegal, when it became independent of France in 1960, readily acknowledged the utility of poetry as a means of promoting political, social and even spiritual development. As he is quoted in the interview later published as *La Poesie de L'action*, noted below:

Whether I write a poem or decide upon a legal project, I am concerned with the same thing from different aspects. We are dealing with the transformation of the world, with the giving of life. My poem creates a new world for my readers, one

in which they participate. I give them spiritual nourishment. It is the same when I promulgate a law.¹

He himself was present at, and participated in, the creation of a new world, or, rather, a new world order. Born in a Senegalese village, Jaol, in 1906, he shone in the French missionary school to which he was sent at age seven, earning a partial scholarship to study in Paris; he went on to become a professor, poet, and French citizen; he was called to military service, and, captured by the Germans as they occupied France, he spent two years in captivity; after the war, he began a political career, somewhat reluctantly though later embraced, culminating in his 20-year term as president. As the critic Janet Spleth notes, the changes of his own personal circumstances “closely reflect the exceptionally dynamic motion of his continent within that era: the decline of colonialism, the struggle for equality and nationhood, and the emergence of the Third World onto the global political scene.”² All the while, Senghor continued his very productive literary life, writing essays and poems that merited his induction into the Academie Francaise in 1983. The poetry was always intended to reach a public; as Spleth further underlines below:

for the writer who regards his songs as a form of verbal magic, these works must be considered an active force ... explicitly intended to effect change—in the poet’s attitude, in the minds of political decision-makers, and in the overall relationships between men and between men and things.³

¹ William Kluback, *Léopold Sédar Senghor: From Politics to Poetry* (New York, Peter Lang, 1997), 2.

² Janice Spleth, *Léopold Sédar Senghor* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1985), 160.

³ Ibid.

The poem “Prayer for the Senegalese Soldiers” (see Appendix D) is dated April 1940, and it presciently bears within it the moral message that Senghor would develop and uphold, as well as uncannily foretelling his fate as his country’s future president. It is one of the poems in Senghor’s second collection, *Black Hosts*, in which he writes of his and his countrymen’s wartime experience. Its title, and rhythm, as a prayer, and its repeated address to the Lord speak of Senghor’s earliest ambition, that of being a priest. As Senghor later recounted, “I was strongly attracted to two careers: a priest and a teacher. ... I decided in effect to become both,”⁴ and his translator, Melvin Dixon, shares this insight: “It wasn’t until Senghor started writing poetry that he satisfied both interests. He was able to instruct his audience about Africa and to offer such prayers and blessings that allowed him to practice, if not officiate in, his religion.”⁵ The French missionary fathers who deterred him from a formal religious vocation inadvertently gave him another: “hearing one of (them) speak pejoratively of the Africans as ‘savages’ ... (he) became incensed and retorted that the Africans, too, had their civilization, ... an affirmation which ... would become the basis for his life’s work.”⁶

By this date of April 1940, Senghor, his fellow francophone Aimé Césaire, and other colonial students in Paris have been percolating for almost a decade with the racial consciousness that would be known as Negritude. It was both a literary sensibility and philosophical stance that Senghor and Césaire would continue to define and evolve,

⁴ Melvin Dixon, introduction to *The Collected Poetry*. Léopold Sédar Senghor and Melvin Dixon (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991), xxvi.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Spleth, *Leopold*, 5.

which Dixon succinctly characterizes as “a certain will to assert black consciousness and to explore its multiple forms of artistic and political expression.”⁷

Educated under the French colonial system of assimilation, which “tended to degrade the African cultural identity by upholding French culture as the highest level of human attainment,”⁸ Senghor and the other francophone students found themselves, in coming to live and study in Paris, precluded from actually being assimilated and treated as equals. Still, their arrival in the 1930s coincided with the works of American black writers of the Harlem Renaissance being welcomed and lauded in literary journals.⁹ Simultaneously, Senghor and Césaire undertook their own researches into cultural identity, and “together they rediscovered Africa in the studies of European ethnologists such as Maurice Delafosse and Leo Frobenius.”¹⁰ From this favorable confluence of intellectual currents arose Senghor’s conviction “that the Africans assimilate judiciously what might be useful in Western civilization instead of being assimilated by it: ‘assimiler, non être assimilés.’”¹¹ It was a formula for addressing both individual alienation and historical discrimination; Dixon sees how it is a private and public affirmation: “For Senghor the power of negritude lies in the power of utterance; it is a call into being of the black presence in the modern world.”¹²

⁷ Dixon, Introduction, xxviii.

⁸ Isidore Okepewho, *The Heritage of African Poetry* (Essex, UK: Longman Group Limited, 1985) 14.

⁹ Dixon, Introduction, xxix.

¹⁰ Spleth, *Leopold*, 10.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹² Dixon, xxix.

This utterance on behalf of the Senegalese soldiers has the double consciousness of “the heartland of Africa” and “the sweet land of France”; it is both an African song (or guimm,) for two flutes, (or kora,) and a psalm-like poem in exquisite French. Within its five stanzas (three of which are excerpted here) can be seen Senghor’s own progressive sense of Negritude. While writing with a sense of pride in his African origin, he also recognizes the existing crossroads of castes and races and roads; Senghor will come to believe that this mélange of cultures is more conducive to human development than one race asserting its superiority over others. He will become even more of an advocate of cultural “métissage” after his experience of being captured in June 1940; while a prisoner of the Germans for two years, he steeped himself in the Greek classics and the worldview of Goethe. Moreover, confronted with the brutality of Nazism, Senghor sees the “dangers of cultural solitude, of retreat into the self, of the wish to only build on the foundation of one’s own race, nation, and native virtues.”¹³

Senghor’s belief in cultural métissage, and his work “to imagine new frameworks for integrating African and European ways of being and knowing ... ,”¹⁴ was further expanded by his reading of the French Jesuit philosopher Teilhard de Chardin in 1953. Under this influence, Senghor’s concept of Negritude evolves into a philosophy of Universalism, building on Teilhard’s thought ““that the world was evolving toward a point where man would be restored to his totality and love would harmonize all human

¹³ Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (Durham; Duke University Press, 2015), 54.

¹⁴ Wilder, 52.

differences.”¹⁵ Though Senghor will not read Teilhard’s work for another thirteen years, one can glimpse in this poem Senghor’s vision of a future where all races shall live in and for mutual benefit, with their cultural contributions equal and essential to each other. He writes of the bodies of Senegalese soldiers and French peasants forming “the humus of dense rotting leaves” so that the “black child and the white child – the order is alphabetical (and in the original French, the order is reversed) ... walk hand in hand.” Though the poems in Senghor’s second collection are judged to voice “some of the poet’s strongest attacks on colonialism and French policy,”¹⁶ this beautiful and painful image resonates as a positive moral lesson in its striving toward universalism.

The vision is only all the more powerful for the emotional tension that the poem holds, conveying anger and grief on the one hand and solidarity and hope on the other. Encompassing such contradictions, the poem displays Senghor’s unique individual perspective, while also “participating in the story of a people and a continent, a role that Senghor self-consciously accepts time and again.”¹⁷ The anger of being “a second-class citizen” even while defending France with one’s life, the anger at “the recruiting machine” harvesting men rather than crops, men who will sacrifice their bodies, not knowing if they will reap any good from “the just cause” for which they fight, or if they are being used as mere fodder, as “black victim decoys”: This is a private and a communal feeling shared with his fellow African recruits. So too must be the grief at the

¹⁵ Kluback, 21.

¹⁶ Spleth, 23.

¹⁷ Spleth, 161.

prospect of one's imminent death in battle, which urges, "Let us savor the ephemeral sweetness of life."

The shared sense of mortality leads naturally enough to the embrace of the French peasants alongside of whom the Senegalese fight, recognizing them as "comrades until death once we first shook hands" and admiring their "gnarled bodies, tortuously scarred by work." Senghor's poem evinces, as the critic Gary Wilder says of the whole collection, *Black Hosts*, "a triple solidarity: with his fellow Africans, metropolitan France and humanity."¹⁸ From this métissage of cultures, brought about by the war, follows the hope that it will be a foundation for the ideal of Universalism, embodied here as the children walking hand in hand.

But this hope is dependent upon the most important emotion that Senghor conveys in the penultimate stanza: forgiveness. He wills, in his vision, that when these children walk "let the cockles of hate / Not encumber their unparalyzed gait"; it is an extraordinary and magnanimous wish. Wilder elucidates how, throughout the poems of *Black Hosts*, Senghor transforms the Senegalese soldiers from "sacrificial victims to self-sacrificing martyrs."¹⁹ In another poem, "Governor Eboue," Senghor lauds how "Africa redeems humanity through a solidarity beyond hatred and self-interest ... (as a) figure of 'redemptive hospitality.'"²⁰ Forgiveness is a powerful public appeal, and Senghor's final

¹⁸ Wilder, 56.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

poem in *Black Hosts, A Prayer for Peace*, forthrightly asks, “ Lord God, forgive white Europe!”²¹

There was, historically, so much to be forgiven, by his own country as well as the whole continent, and Senghor, as his biographer Janet Vaillant says, “felt he had a calling to speak for his people and for all colonized people seeking to throw off the weight of colonial attitudes.”²² The “second class citizen” speaking in this poem serves as an eloquent poet of witness, testifying to the socio-political conditions in which he lives and may die. Indeed, the whole movement of Negritude comes out of “the heritage of suffering, ... the historical fact [of] servitude, either directly through slavery or indirectly through colonization”²³; and, as stated earlier, its artistic expression is allied with political action.

Senghor, in fact, had become a French citizen only in 1933, having been born outside of the Four Communes mentioned here, the four cities whose residents were born into citizenship.²⁴ Returning to Senegal in 1944 for his doctoral research, he was persuaded to enter politics, “reluctantly, for he did not want to abandon his successful academic career... (but) it did not curtail his cultural activities.”²⁵ And thus he began his ascent to become figuratively “the good king of my people”—the first president of an independent Senegal. But independence was not, for Senghor, the most urgent or the

²¹ Ibid, 58.

²² Janet G. Vaillant, introduction to *Black, French, and African: a Life of Léopold Sédar Senghor* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1990), 3.

²³ Sylvia Washington Bâ, *The Concept of Negritude in the Poetry of Léopold Sédar Senghor* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973), 27.

²⁴ Spleth, 6.

²⁵ Spleth, 12.

most important political goal. In keeping with his triple solidarity, his evolution towards Universalism, Senghor, as Wilder says, "began to envision new political forms to accommodate the cultural hybridity and social interdependence created by imperialism."²⁶ Already here, in this poem of 1940, it is "the children of Confederated France (who) walk hand in hand."

Senghor's political vision of an association, of a federated France comprising the metropole and its former colonies, also had an integral spiritual dimension. After his wartime experience, he saw "a degraded Europe, dehumanized by instrumental reason, competitive materialism, and utilitarianism."²⁷ He believed that African culture could be a revitalizing, rehumanizing force, with its "greater emotional and spiritual development, vitality and understanding of the interconnectedness of all life in the universe."²⁸ This commingling of cultures would be beneficial not just to both, but to all of humanity.

Senghor's sense of universal solidarity went on to configure its own version of African socialism. He drew only selectively from his reading of Marx; rejecting "his determinism and contempt for spiritual values," while agreeing with the goal of a "society in which the human personality can reach its potential."²⁹ But more influential to this combined political and spiritual ideal was the nourishing concept of Teilhard de Chardin, again, the "plus-etre ... a situation not just of well-being but of greater being, the

²⁶ Wilder, 61.

²⁷ Wilder, 64.

²⁸ Vaillant, 266.

²⁹ Vaillant, 268 – 269.

realization of all the potential of the human mind and heart.”³⁰ For all of the fraught circumstances in which Senghor wrote his *Prayer of the Senegalese Soldiers*, it still conveys a glimpse of his cherished goal: “human self-realization through civilizational flourishing as the ultimate aim of socio-political arrangements,”³¹ as it evokes a place “where the harsh freedom from work / becomes radiantly sweet.”

So the would-be priest and erstwhile professor, who becomes the sublime poet and practiced statesman, uses a poetic form that can accommodate prayer, pedagogy, and politics. Its long, psalm-like strophes hold moral, emotional and socio-political weight, without stinting its reverence. Its address to “You who are the Unknown Presence. . . . You who listen to the smallest breaths,” genuflects to a real and abiding sense of God. Within the spiritual framework is the very rich imagery and rhythm of African expression that the creator of Negritude discovered and propagated, becoming attuned to “the whispers at night from deep inside the huts.” Spleth explains that Senghor, “in the process of translating African poetry into French . . . came upon a verse form which seemed suitable. . . . This more creative, more flexible form was the verset”; she further notes that “Larousse defines the term verset as meaning a Bible verse.”³² Senghor himself conjectured that “there may be certain similarities between African poetry and the Bible. The Psalms were . . . oral poetry. Destined to be sung or chanted.”³³ Expansive,

³⁰ Vaillant, 269.

³¹ Wilder, 64.

³² Spleth, 43.

³³ Ibid.

incantatory, Senghor's artistry is uniquely suited to "give poetic expression to African experience in a European tongue ... that does honor to both and betrays neither."³⁴

Finally, the fact that Senghor wrote his versets in the French language only underscores his vision of reconciliation between the races, the colonizer and the colonized, creating a future federation. As Wilder says, he "uses French to decenter, rather than to reaffirm, metropolitan culture and readers ... to reconcile particular African forms of life with the cosmopolitan cultures created by imperialism."³⁵ But also, on a personal level, as his biographer Janet Vaillant asserts, "just as he refused to choose between his talents as poet and politician, ... he refused to choose between his two homelands, France and Africa. He knew their strengths and weaknesses, their darkness and their light, and he loved them both."³⁶

The example of Senghor's belief in the power of poetry to heal and harmonize peoples and nations, after centuries of slavery and discrimination, and to imagine new political relationships where humanity can thrive in cultural reciprocity, is one that continues to give hope, seventeen years after his death. On a state visit to Martinique in 1976, then President Senghor spoke memorably for himself, and of his race, saying, "In spite of everything, ... we have transformed suffering into joy and the long lament (plainte) into song: into a work of beauty. That is Negritude."³⁷

³⁴ Ba, 4.

³⁵ Wilder, 67.

³⁶ Vaillant, 344.

³⁷ Wilder, 52.

Chapter Six

Seamus Heaney: Crediting poetry as affirmation and healing From "Station Island, VII"

Some seventeen days before the catastrophic events of 9/11, the Nobel Prize-winning Northern Irish poet, Seamus Heaney, published an op-ed piece entitled "Poetry's Power Against Intolerance." His article was occasioned by an upcoming U.N. conference on racism, and his beginning point of reference was a poem by the Lithuanian poet Czeslaw Milosz, "Incantation." This poem, Heaney wrote, reminded readers that "art remains answerable to 'what should be' as well as to 'things as they are,'" and that, although "the fight against racism certainly must be waged by governments ... the fight is also helped by every statement that strengthens an individual's moral sense ... every utterance that reawakens the feeling of personal dignity or promotes a trust in human solidarity."¹ The events of 9/11 that soon followed this declaration would seemingly have bludgeoned, yet again, the belief that an individual lyric voice could in any sense adequately respond to war waged by terror, intentionally targeting civilians for mass casualties.

In fact, as mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, New Yorkers who experienced the attacks, as well as others around the nation, turned to poetry in their individual and collective grief.² Heaney's own belief in poetry as a force for moral, emotional, and socio-political binding and cohering, both for an individual and a society,

¹ Seamus Heaney, "Poetry's Power Against Intolerance," *New York Times*, August 26, 2001.

² Dinitia Smith, "In Shelley or Auden, in the Sonnet or Free Verse, the Eerily Intimate Power of Poetry to Console," *New York Times*, October 1, 2001.

was worked out throughout his four decades plus of writing, and within the intense, sectarian violence that riddled Northern Ireland during much of that literary career. His work as a poet was cited by the Nobel Committee for Literature in 1995 for its “lyrical beauty and ethical depth which exalt everyday miracles and the living past.”³ This concise and just appraisal underscores the choice of Heaney as the final poet to discuss in this consideration of the public use of poetry.

Heaney also follows naturally and complements the four other poets that have been discussed. As a student in boarding school, “a sixth-form homunculus,”⁴ he studied Latin and Virgil, which became a lifelong interest that continued and culminated in his translation of *Aeneid*’s Book VI, “the posthumous offering that Seamus Heaney’s estate has and that was in his computer” after his death in August 2013.⁵ As for Dante, Heaney translated several cantos of the *Commedia*, and the poetic sequence, *Station Island*, from which I have chosen an episode, is his own Dantesque pilgrimage and self-querying. And Wordsworth was, for Heaney, a manifest influence, both for his poetic immersion in nature and country values, as well as for the poetic theory expressed in the Preface. Finally, while Heaney has not any apparent connection to Senghor, there is a parallel in their lives of writing in the aftermath of colonialism, sharing the experience of being second-class citizens within their own country, and assuming a responsibility of speaking

³ Bernard O’Donoghue, introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney*, Bernard O’Donoghue, ed. (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1.

⁴ Seamus Heaney, translator’s note to *Aeneid Book VI: a New Verse Translation*, First bilingual edition. Virgil, and Seamus Heaney (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016), ix.

⁵ Ari Shapiro, “Seamus Heaney’s Translation of ‘The Aeneid’ Gets Posthumous Publication,” Books, NPR, posted April 14, 2016 <https://www.npr.org/2016/04/14/474265657/seamus-heaneys-translation-of-the-aeneid-gets-posthumous-publication> (Accessed October 21, 2018)

about and for that condition. Moreover, they both excelled at, and in that way, conquered, their colonizer's own language. Heaney, then, makes whole this handful of poets who, it is this thesis's intention to show, ratify the public value of the art by so uniquely melding the private and the collective voice in their work.

The selection chosen from "Station Island" is Stanza VII (see Appendix E), and it is narrated by the poet, as is the whole sequence; it recounts a "Dante-influenced purgatorial pilgrimage to Lough Derg in Country Donegal, a demanding penitential programme that Heaney undertook three times when he was young."⁶ Published in 1984, it is not quite midway in Heaney's poetic career, which began in 1965 with the success of his first collection, *Death of a Naturalist*. From the first, Heaney's work self-consciously addressed the value of his vocation; as the anthologist Wes Davis states: "The question that his poetry will continually ask itself or invent itself by asking: How is a poem to be of use?" which his early collections answer by recreating "the music of work done in the workaday world of rural Northern Ireland."⁷ But once the Troubles began, the period of civil war between the Catholics and the Protestants of Northern Ireland ignited in August 1969, the question became more pressing.

Heaney, along with his contemporaries Michael Longley and Derek Mahon, had "by the outbreak of the Troubles ... apprenticed to the craft and printed their sign in the firmament well before the intense challenge to consciousness posed by violence. When the Troubles hit, all these poets had to rise to the occasion and find 'images and symbols

⁶ O'Donoghue, introduction, 7.

⁷ Wes Davis, *An Anthology of Modern Irish Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 325 – 326.

adequate to our predicament' (Heaney)."⁸ Almost two decades on, then, both for Heaney's artistry and its backdrop of strife and bloodshed, the poet continues to interrogate himself and poetry, creating the "possibility that the work might have some moral bearing on the political situation."⁹ As Heaney returns on his imaginative pilgrimage to Station Island, peopled with "figures from his own past and the literary past,"¹⁰ he provides a moral lesson that has remained as relevant to the tenor of our times as that of three decades ago.

The adequate symbol here is this revenant, who was an actual acquaintance, appearing to tell the poet of his own murder at the hands of the other side. Heaney is shocked by the sight of his wounded, damaged head, and after taking in the narration, sees him as "the perfect, clean, unthinkable victim." He is not named, nor is it specified who ambushed him in his own shop late at night. This lack of detail has two effects: it emphasizes the familiarity, the ease between the two, but it also makes this victim, "big-limbed, decent, open-faced," a potential stand-in for any ordinary civilian who loses their life by an act of terror. The victims of terror, three decades later, now have their truncated, distinct lives sketched out by the press; invariably they are "perfect, clean, and unthinkable" in their ordinariness, and it is the utter randomness of their deaths that makes terror such a devastating weapon.

⁸ Chris Agee, introduction to *The New North, Contemporary Poetry from Northern Ireland* (Winston-Salem, N.C.: Wake Forest University Press, 2008), xxxvii.

⁹ Davis, 326.

¹⁰ O'Donoghue, 7.

But this victim does have a name, even if he is memorialized for future readers in anonymity: a high school soccer teammate, William Strathearn, a thirty-nine-year-old father of seven, murdered in 1981. Heaney brings him to life, ageless, with “an athlete’s cleanliness / shining off of him,” and even kidding the poet about having put on weight, in a casual interchange after the frightening narration of being summoned to his death. The imagined conversation between the self-aware poet and the blameless Ulster victim is an agile display of how, for Heaney, “in his writing, the private and the public compete for space, and the tragic and the quotidian contest each other’s dominance,” as the critic Helen Vendler describes.¹¹ And while Strathearn, as an individual, could be seen, like other ghostly visions from the past, to “represent the almost unrepresentable collective suffering of the North,”¹² she further suggests that for Heaney, he is emblematic of an alternate destiny, that the poet is recognizing that he himself “could have been caught in a sectarian ambush.”¹³ A reader could quite readily respond to and identify with such a situation, as might any of us.

The vivid rendering of Strathearn, from the “dried blood” on his cheek, and even his trembling like a heatwave, is a moral restitution for his murder, perhaps even more solacing than the fact that his paramilitary executioners were caught and jailed. For in its indelible portrait, it reminds us that, as John Wilson Foster says, it is “only by seeing things in their inescapable presence can we perceive their glowing absence—the

¹¹ Helen Vendler, *Seamus Heaney* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998), 5.

¹² *Ibid.*, 2.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 93.

luminous formula of Heaney's art all along."¹⁴ Another critic, Joseph Brooker, says of this and the other shades who appear, "that they literalize memory, transforming it from the fraught process of recollection to a startlingly complete recovery."¹⁵ This individual life and death is enshrined, and even hallowed, in these lines.

The incident is all the more memorable for the emotional pull it exerts, on the poet-narrator himself, and by extension on the reader. The emotion of terror itself is embodied in Strathearn's own recounting: hearing the dramatic "knocking, knocking" in the dead of night, his own foreboding by which he instinctively squeezes his wife's hand, his "going weak in the legs." The moment itself, where the victim experiences his own death as a memory of "the stale smell of /of cooked meat or something" completes the horror in a simultaneous evocation of gun smoke and his fatally wounded flesh. It is an unspeakable end, unimaginable, yet here it is spoken for Heaney's generation, and for his readers to come. The terror of this moment is felt, and in the fellow feeling, is transformed into pity, a pity that recalls and reminds us that "what Virgil called *lacrimae rerum*, the tears of things, can be reabsorbed and re-experienced."¹⁶

But this moment of re-experience is bracketed by the other emotional undercurrent of this scene, that of guilt. It begins with the soothing sight of water, which, however, could be "a clear barometer or a mirror." The poet is in fact both subject to the

¹⁴ John Wilson Foster, *The Achievement of Seamus Heaney* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1995), 4.

¹⁵ Joseph Brooker, "Remember Everything: Things Past in Station Island," in *Seamus Heaney, Poet, Critic, Translator*, ed. Ashby Bland Crowder and Jason David Hall (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 169.

¹⁶ Seamus Heaney, introduction to *The Redress of Poetry* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), xv.

atmospheric pressure of his times, “the political stasis, cyclical violence, social and economic stagnation (that) became second nature to a riven culture,”¹⁷ and he is seeking his own reflection in the mirror of his art. Heaney admits his reluctance to meet this revenant, and, at the scene’s conclusion, he accuses himself for “timid circumspect involvement,” seeking forgiveness from his acquaintance, and surely from himself.

The guilt bespeaks a continued weighing of his vocation and its value in such a tragic context as the political situation of Northern Ireland. The whole sequence of *Station Island* is “a series of meetings with ghosts of the type Dante meets in the *Purgatorio*: friendly, sad, self-defining, exemplary, admonitory, rebuking ... advisors, from beyond the grave, on the poet’s responsibilities in the realms of ethics and aesthetics.”¹⁸

This particular advisor, the murdered acquaintance, takes down his killers as “shites thinking they were the be-all and the end-all,” and further seems to blithely dismiss the poet’s guilt and the whole internecine civil struggle with “all that’s above my head.” It feels almost as complete and refreshing an absolution as the one that will be given by the shade that Heaney encounters in the twelfth and final scene. James Joyce, the expatriate Irishman, appears, rounding out and countering the intensely local revenants of this pilgrimage, to scold and chide him, exhorting, “The main thing is to write / for the joy of it. ... Don’t be so earnest, / let others wear the sackcloth and the

¹⁷ Agee, Introduction, xxx.

¹⁸ Neil Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: a Critical Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), 115 - 116.

ashes.”¹⁹ Strathearn, then, is a pivotal encounter for the poet: an emotional, yet provisional, immersion in terror, pity, and guilt. Heaney had written, a decade earlier, of his belief that poetry “ can eventually make new feelings, or feelings about feelings happen ... and anyone can see that in this country a refinement of feelings will be more urgent than a reframing of policies.”²⁰ Enacting Wordsworth’s own belief in poetry’s capacity to rectify emotions, this dialogue with Strathearn seems to discharge Heaney’s dual responsibilities as a citizen and as an artist.

There are further and specific considerations of socio-political witness on display in this incident. First of all is to note that Station Island was “since early medieval times ... a place of pilgrimage for Irish Catholics ...” and that “in the eighteenth century, under the anti-Catholic Penal Laws” the pilgrimage was suppressed; Heaney’s setting connotes “a nexus of Irish Catholic religious, historical and cultural affiliations.”²¹ The place itself, then, recalls three centuries of Protestant domination, and the “abiding, if always fluid history of cultural bifurcation;”²² by the time of the outbreak of the Troubles “the prevailing status of Catholics as second class-citizens”²³ had long been entrenched.

Then there is obviously the sectarian murder, although the specifics are here left unsaid, as mentioned earlier. The next incident in the pilgrimage sequence will see Heaney accosted by the ghost of his murdered cousin, who unflinchingly states, “The

¹⁹ Seamus Heaney, *Station Island* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1985), 93.

²⁰ O’Donoghue, Introduction, 6.

²¹ Corcoran, *Poetry of*, 115.

²² Agee, Introduction, xxiii – xxiv.

²³ *Ibid.*, xxvii.

Protestant who shot me through the head / I accuse directly.” But this victim’s voice, howsoever strident, is one of a whole chorus. Vendler praises Heaney’s “oeuvre of strong social engagement, looking steadily and with stunning poetic force at what it means to be a contemporary citizen of Northern Ireland,” but she also notes how “he has tried consistently to bring intellectual reflection to the emotional attitudes that too often yield the binary position-taking of propaganda.”²⁴ Heaney’s poetry of witness includes reflection on that witness, serving as a barometer and a mirror.

That reflection includes his own individual “cultural bifurcation”: born as a Catholic in Northern Ireland, “raised in a biddable nationalism ... that obediently accepted Protestant ascendancy,”²⁵ and a student of English literature at Queen’s University Belfast. His earlier and perhaps most controversial volume, *North*, depicted bog bodies as symbols of the consequences of political violence, and was judged to “evoke in an unbalanced way the suffering of the Catholics of Northern Ireland.”²⁶ Heaney’s writing has worked to free itself, and himself, to be a capacious “inclusive, non-factional poet of second thoughts, of two minds, of the ‘in-between’ and undogmatic.”²⁷ As Heaney has more and more pursued the art of poetry, rather than a sectarian bias, his writing has had the “ultimately political effect of (his) success in finding an individual poetic signature on an Irish frequency, an Irish claim on the English

²⁴ Vendler, *Seamus*, 2.

²⁵ Foster, *Achievement*, 21.

²⁶ O’Donoghue, Introduction, 5.

²⁷ Dennis O’Driscoll, “Heaney in Public,” *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney*, Bernard O’Donoghue, ed. (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 59.

lyric.”²⁸ Heaney’s winning of the Nobel Prize could be seen as a somewhat similar triumph as the election of Léopold Sédar Senghor to the French Academy, in that a former “second class citizen” reaches the apogee of literary acclaim and global recognition.

So we have in Heaney’s work an individual voice holding its own, sounding its note; and in doing so, “it is as if Poetry has been his conscience, preventing blatant partisanship or propaganda, keeping him in political no man’s land, as fidelity to Poetry dictates,”²⁹ as Foster states. Heaney’s mastery of the lyric summons all of its artistic techniques to hold moral, emotional, and socio-political views, while maintaining his own artistic freedom. In his own words, Heaney sees poetic technique as ““that whole creative effort ... to bring the meaning of experience within the jurisdiction of form.””³⁰

Here, in the passage below, the lyric gains some elasticity from narrative and dramatic verse, as it incorporates storytelling and dialogue. In this Heaney is taking his lead from Dante, especially in using a modified terza rima, the three-line tercet form, whose end rhymes link and propel the poem. The internal music leads to and absorbs the shock of what is being told, notably in the the poet’s triple end rhyme in the twelfth tercet—“say, way, day,” which is both urgent and emphatic, and yet still conversational. As Vendler points out, “Internal structure gives his poems a satisfying musical rightness

²⁸ Davis, p. 328.

²⁹ Foster, *Achievement*, 4.

³⁰ Vendler, *Seamus*, 8.

as they unfold. ... Readers even when they do not notice technique ... are being persuaded by syntax, structures, themes, symbols.”³¹

She also mentions how “Heaney’s language is rich in simplicity as well as ornateness.”³² Here the language is largely that of the everyday, but there is a strategic use of diction in two word choices. The poet notes “an athlete’s *cleanliness* / shining off of him” (italics mine). The description is true to the reminiscence of Strathearn as a soccer player, but in the whole, charged context, cleanliness resonates as to his victimhood, in being neither a political nor a military actor, and can even imply the sordidness to which both professions can descend. The other ornate word that calls attention, intentionally, to itself, is “circumspect,” here allied with “timid” to describe Heaney’s “involvement,” or, rather to confess its lack. But though “circumspect” may be heard as pejorative, as overly cautious, it can also be heard as the virtue of being prudent or discreet. In its Latin roots, of course, it suggests looking around.³³ It recalls to this reader Heaney’s own reading of Wordsworth, praising his theme of “surrender and vigilance ... contradictory allegiance to the numinous and to the matter-of-fact.”³⁴ Heaney has combined vigilance and surrender in his individual voice, enabling it to record and respond, amid “the ferocity of the Troubles, ... [when] historical consciousness had

³¹ Ibid., 3.

³² Ibid.

³³ Collins English Dictionary, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/circumspect> (accessed November 18, 2018).

³⁴ Seamus Heaney, introduction to *The Essential Wordsworth*, William Wordsworth, William and Seamus Heaney, 1st ed. (New York: Ecco Press, 1988), 9.

collided with the lyric.”³⁵ His conjuring of a murdered acquaintance exemplifies how, as the Nobel citation has it, his poetry “exalts everyday miracles and the living past.” As this shade trembles and fades, so too does the terza rima, as the rhyme loosens in the fourth and final line. It is a lyrical grace note that expresses Heaney’s belief that “the form of the poem is crucial to poetry’s power ... to remind us that we are hunters and gatherers of values.”³⁶ Poetry, in its unique capability to memorably express those values, is to be credited for affirmation and healing.

³⁵ Agee, Introduction, xxxix.

³⁶ Seamus Heaney, *Crediting Poetry: the Nobel Lecture*. 1st ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), 53 – 54.

Chapter Seven

Poetry in Three Public Programs: The Clemente Course in the Humanities, Free Minds, and Split This Rock

Now that we have considered the work of these five poets, and how their poetry merges individual motivation with a collective sensibility, serving as a medium of private and public expression, we will look briefly at three public programs that use poetry to advance civil society. Each of these programs affirms, by their own existence, that poetry has a public use, and that that use is more attuned to transforming individual psyches than to achieving specific political ends. These three programs may well foster a civic sense, or political consciousness and engagement, but their use of poetry recognizes its independent functioning as a creative act, not as a tool for propaganda. It is a means of providing an inclusive, public space for individuals who previously had found none in civil society.

The juncture between an individual voice, made distinctive and durable by poetic technique, and its reception by individuals who, alone and yet with others, read or listen, and absorb, is where poetry's public power lies. The late Seamus Heaney pointed out that "the audience for poetry is usually smallish; the potential public for it is very large. Some people get an audience and then get what Wordsworth called a 'public.'"¹ He himself, as well as the other poets we have examined somewhat closely, all gained an audience in their own lifetimes, and subsequently a "public" in posterity, both by inclusion in a literary canon that is taught, and by a continued general readership.

¹ Dennis O'Driscoll, "Heaney in Public," *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney*, Bernard O'Donoghue, ed. (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 66

The relatively small audience that a poet may initially garner, however, which was the instigation for Dana Gioia’s essay “Can Poetry Matter?” mentioned in the introduction, raises the question of access, of who gets to read or hear poetry, outside of a formal academic setting. These three programs have brought poetry—the reading and writing of it—to individuals who have not had access to, or success in, or redress within, such a setting. Let us consider how they have brokered a new public space for poetry.

As described in Chapter One, the Clemente Course in the Humanities was created by Earl Shorris in 1995 as a pedagogy to “teach the humanities at college level to people living in economic distress.”² He began with the traditional understanding of the humanities, which dates to Renaissance Italy: “philosophy, art, history, literature, and logic, in Petrarch’s formulation.”³ Undertaking the rigorous curriculum, Shorris believed, would enable his targeted students to escape the economic and social strictures of their circumstances by learning to reflect, rather than react. There are those who questioned whether the course has been, from its inception, too Eurocentric. Shorris disputed this, as noted below:

The course places great emphasis on the Greeks, as it should. Their work has lasted and influenced all the world that followed simply because of its quality. It did not endure for reasons of the race or gender of its authors. Moreover, those dead white European males, especially the Greeks, were not the Establishment, they were the great troublemakers of history. Their art spurred people to think reflectively, to question the status quo. Our students deserve nothing less. If we were to deny them these conversations with the great ideas and give them instead

² Clemente Course in the Humanities, home page, <https://clementecourse.org/> (accessed December 6, 2018).

³ Kristin O’Connell, “Social Transformation through the Humanities: An Interview with Earl Shorris,” The Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities, *Mass Humanities*, Spring 2000 <http://masshumanities.org/about/news/s00-stth/> (accessed December 6, 2018).

a curriculum based on race or gender, we would be cheating them. And they have already been cheated. Society has already denied them access to the very works and ideas that bring people legitimate power in a democracy. That is why they are poor, why their parents were poor.⁴

The students themselves have always seemed to relish their exposure to Socrates and the opportunity for their own Socratic dialogues.⁵

Since its founding, the Clemente Course has reached more than ten thousand students directly, and countless others indirectly, as its participants inspire family members and others in their community. There are now thirty Clemente courses nationwide, and in 2015 a Clemente Veterans' Initiative was added, "incorporating texts that offer new, non-military perspectives for community engagement and life choices: Plato, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Simone Weil and Martin Luther King."⁶

The requirements to participate in the Clemente Course are to be between the ages of 18 and 45, and to be living at 150 percent of the poverty level or lower. As of September 2018, there are an estimated 40 million to 45 million Americans living below the poverty level.⁷ Given this, an outcome of ten thousand or so participants over thirteen years may not seem to be a noteworthy statistic, especially with the additional information that only 50 percent go on to transfer their credits earned through the Clemente and to complete a college degree.⁸ But the impact on individual lives is

⁴ O'Connell, "Social Transformation,"

⁵ Clemente Course, "Testimonials," <https://clementecourse.org/>

⁶ Clemente Course, "Clemente Veterans Initiative," <https://clementecourse.org/>

⁷ Glenn Thrush, "U.S. Recovery Eludes Many Living Below Poverty Level, Census Suggests," *New York Times*, September, 13, 2018.

⁸ Nora Caplan-Bricker, "For Richer and Poorer: teaching the humanities to everyone," *The New Republic*, February 16, 2013.

incalculable; one of the program's directors, John Marsh, describes "the almost inconceivable drive of students to attend the course in the face of already overwhelming commitments—children, jobs, families." The countless testimonials of how lives are salvaged and redirected must be considered alongside of the numbers alone.⁹

Marsh himself questions the premise that higher education, by itself, is an anti-poverty program, saying that "college is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for battling poverty," and pointing out that the problem of good jobs in a global economy requires economic solutions.¹⁰ But he believes that creating the conditions of "economic security, health, free time ... would enable people to read poetry and achieve as Aristotle has it, perfect happiness through contemplation."¹¹ That stance reiterates Shorris's own instinctual belief in the beneficent effect of a humanities curriculum, with a literature component that includes canonical and contemporary poets. And it is borne out by its participants, who would probably have never had access otherwise to these poetic voices. In the words of one, "Poetry awakens something in my mind. It's my medication: healthy for your mind and healthy for your soul."¹² That this inclusive pedagogy has outward rippling effects is further underlined by one of the teachers in the program, Vive Griffith, who says of the program that its "artistic practices plant the skills necessary for civic

⁹ Elisa Wiseman, "A life worth living: The Odyssey Project proves the humanities can change destinies," *Isthmus*, February 23, 2017. <https://isthmus.com/news/cover-story/the-odyssey-project-proves-humanities-can-change-destinies/> (accessed December 6, 2018)

¹⁰ John Marsh, "Neither Necessary nor Sufficient: Community Education and the Fight against Poverty," Clemente Course, Research, <https://clementecourse.org/>

¹¹ Marsh, "Neither Necessary nor Sufficient,"

¹² National Endowment for the Humanities, "National Humanities Medal, 2014: The Clemente Course in the Humanities" <https://www.neh.gov/about/awards/national-humanities-medals/the-clemente-course-in-the-humanities> (accessed December 1, 2018).

engagement, such as critical thinking, empathy, using a public voice.”¹³ Poetry has a very public use, and place, in the Clemente Course for the Humanities.

As mentioned in the introduction, Earl Shorris conceived of the Clemente Course after a provocative conversation with a woman at a correctional institution who hungered for “the moral life of downtown.” The isolating and dehumanizing situation of incarceration was a similar stimulus for the co-founders of the Free Minds Book Club and Writing Workshop, Tara Libert and Kelli Taylor, who began bringing the power of writing poetry to young offenders in 2002. Ms. Taylor, a television producer, had earlier forged a friendship with a young inmate, Glen McGarris, after interviewing him and learning of the tragic life that brought him to death row. For four years, they exchanged letters about books they read together until his execution in 1999, which became the posthumous inspiration for such a unique book club. Ms. Libert was also a television producer who had produced many works about the criminal justice system before going directly into service as a volunteer literacy tutor. In November 2002, the two brought books—and their own whole-hearted, accepting presence—to a group of teenage boys in the D.C. jail, and asked them to “introduce themselves ... in a poem.”¹⁴ After much silence, one quiet boy stood up to read his, and it unleashed applause from the twenty others. Libert and Taylor built on that initial experience, recognizing “that books and creative writing have the incredible power to teach, build community, inspire individuals

¹³ Clemente Course in the Humanities, “News,” <https://clementecourse.org/>

¹⁴ Tara Libert and Kelli Taylor, eds., *They Call Me 299-359* (Washington, D.C.: Free Minds Book Club & Writing Workshop, 2011), 5.

and change lives”¹⁵; they have harnessed this power for the Book Club & Writing Workshop that meets every week at the D.C. Jail. As with Clemente Course attendees, these “juvenile inmates [who] come together to discuss a work of contemporary literature ... have often had little meaningful exposure to books.”¹⁶

Ms. Libert expands upon the uses, and the power, that poetry has for them.

Our members who are home from prison speak to schools and community groups about the root causes of youth incarceration. We call them Poet Ambassadors because they represent all of their Free Minds brothers who are still incarcerated. They share their childhood experiences and use poetry to start a dialogue and bring about healing and creative solutions to youth violence. ... Shared poetry is an immediate connector. Differences just seem to melt away. ... Poetry has this awesome way of breaking down stereotypes and misconceptions and getting to the raw humanity that connects all of us.¹⁷

In a Free Minds Worksheet, the material for young inmates to read and consider is varied, including Sudoku puzzles and Obama’s inaugural address, as well as writing prompts. There is a poem by Edgar Guest, “It Couldn’t Be Done” (see Appendix F), which might be more critically called verse, as its message of encouragement is as emphatic as its repeated rhymes. One can see how this poem can serve as an introduction to stressed language, and to intentionally framing a message, and how welcoming that could be to a young man who has not had the experience of reading, reflecting or expressing himself on the page. The creative writing workshop is a use of poetry without stressing the demands of technique or craft; as Ms. Libert says, “Very loose, expressive

¹⁵ Free Minds Book Club & Writing Workshop, “Our Work, DC Jail Book Club,” <https://freemindsbookclub.org/our-work/dc-jail-book-club> (accessed December 15, 2018)

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Free Minds website, “In the News: 7 Questions: Tara Libert, Executive Director of Free Minds Book Club and Writing Workshop, April 2015” (accessed December 15, 2018)

writing”¹⁸ encouraged. And yet there are moral lessons that are learned, emotional insights that are gained, grievously disadvantaged lives that are witnessed, and there is a profound sense of inclusion for these young inmates who write and exchange their poems. And that is all the more reinforced when members of the community outside comment upon and respond to the works, as occurs in the twice-monthly Free Minds Write Night sessions. The Free Minds Book Club and Writing Workshop’s use of poetry creates and completes a circle of belonging and healing, with “words that sing, that stumble, that hiccup and then soar again.”¹⁹

The third organization that uses poetry in its public programming was also founded in and is based in Washington, D.C., and that proximity to the federal government is a spur to its mission. This is the dynamic nonprofit Split This Rock, which celebrated its tenth anniversary in April 2018, and which “cultivates, teaches, and celebrates poetry that bears witness to injustice and provokes social change. It calls poets to a greater role in public life and fosters a national network of socially engaged poets.”²⁰ As the political center of the country, Washington, D.C., is a magnet for protests and demonstrations, and Split This Rock was birthed from a gathering of D.C. Poets Against the War, part of a national movement of anti-war protests against the Iraq War instigated by poet and poetry publisher Sam Hamill, in February 2003.

¹⁸ Tara Libert, interview by the author, Washington, D.C., December 14, 2018.

¹⁹ Tara Libert and Kelli Taylor, eds., *They Call Me 299-359*, 4.

²⁰ Split This Rock, *Poetry Festival Program: Poems of Provocation and Witness Celebrating 10 Years* (Washington, D.C., 2018). 6.

Poet-activists Sarah Browning, Melissa Tuckey, and Regie Cabico went on, in 2006, to plan a national festival for March 2008, “to coincide with the fifth anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Iraq.”²¹ The invitation to poets around the country to participate was issued at the 2007 Association of Writers and Writing Programs Conference. It received an enthusiastic reception, as “over 250 poets and activists attended ... [and] over 400 attended each nightly featured reading” of the three-day event, March 20 - 23, 2008. It is worth noting that the AWP’s membership is largely comprised of writers who teach, and students who are enrolled in creative writing programs, and who could be described as the specialist literary subculture that Dana Gioia described in his essay “Can Poetry Matter?” But those poets, in and out of academia, who flocked to the first and subsequent Split This Rock festivals have seen themselves as “struggling at the fringes of the literary landscape, where ‘political poetry wasn’t considered Real Poetry, when poetry that told the stories of marginalized people was itself profoundly marginalized.”²²

In its first decade, Split This Rock has sponsored six biennial national poetry festivals, each one growing in attendance; organized youth programs, poetry contests, readings and workshops, and compiled an online Social Justice Database. It has created a community of diverse and inclusive poetic voices, who “write lyrical, narrative, avant garde, formal, and elliptical work. The poets represent a range of racial, ethnic, religious, gender and sexual identities.”²³ Split This Rock’s merging of poetry and activism has

²¹ Ibid., 8.

²² Split This Rock, *Poetry Festival Program*, 3.

²³ Sarah Browning, “Split This Rock: Introduction,” *Poetry Magazine*, Volume 212, no. 1 (April 2018): 6.

broadened literary culture, as Executive Director Sarah Browning describes, by enlarging “the understanding we have of ourselves as a people” and realizing the need to “build our own institutions and storm the gates of the existing ones.”²⁴

Split This Rock is a member of the Poetry Coalition, “an alliance of more than 20 organizations in 11 cities dedicated to working together to promote the value poets bring to our culture and the important contribution poetry makes in the lives of people of all ages and backgrounds.”²⁵ These organizations rightly claim credit for the increase in poetry readership in the last five years, with almost 12 percent of adults now reading poetry, the highest percentage on record for a fifteen-year period.²⁶ The increase is seen in young adults, African Americans, Asian Americans and Hispanics, which supports the view that these different groups had not seen their identities reflected or their concerns redressed in the individual lyric voices being published and read.

There is also the parallel rise of poetry reading as an oral performance, as with the National Endowment for the Arts program, Poetry Out Loud, a poetry recitation competition for high school students from all fifty states, U.S. territories, and jurisdictional entities, begun in 2006, and the nationwide Teen Slams, whose winners participate in the annual Library of Congress Book Festival. Split This Rock has also been very active since 2010 in coaching young poets to read and recite their own work,

²⁴ Split This Rock, *Poetry Festival Program*, 3.

²⁵ Split This Rock, “News: The National Endowment for the Arts Finds that Poetry Reading is on the Rise, added June 12, 2018,” <http://www.splitthisrock.org/site/article/nea-finds-poetry-reading-is-on-the-rise> (accessed December 23, 2018).

²⁶ Sunil Iyengar, “Taking Note: Poetry Reading Is Up—Federal Survey Results,” Art Works Blog, <https://www.arts.gov/art-works/2018/taking-note-poetry-reading-%E2%80%94federal-survey-results> (accessed, December 23, 2018).

whether traditional or hip hop, straight or theatrical. Recitation and memorization was one of the proposals that Dana Gioia strongly recommended for bringing poets out of their subculture to engage with the public, and the Poetry Out Loud program began under his term as Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts.

As poetry leaves the page, and the written word becomes Spoken Word, are its traditional techniques of rhythm, diction and metaphor still deployed? Yes, but perhaps they are reconfigured, becoming, as noted below:

... elements of rap, hip-hop, storytelling, theater, and jazz, rock, blues, and folk music. Characterized by rhyme, repetition, improvisation, and word play, spoken word poems frequently refer to issues of social justice, politics, race, and community. ... Spoken word may draw on music, sound, dance, or other kinds of performance to connect with audiences.²⁷

It remains the act of an individual voice, speaking, aloud for itself while connecting with its audience, a reminder that the ancient epics were similarly recited in and appreciated by its surrounding community.

As we see in these three different organizations, their public programs use poetry as a means of learning, healing, and connecting. The power of poetry to benefit individuals and civil society, from studying the highest form of the literary art, to framing the simplest but authentic expression, to the claiming of identity by transforming style and content, remains a constant and regenerative resource for our humanity.

²⁷ Poetry Foundation, "Spoken Word," <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/spoken-word> (accessed December 23, 2018).

Conclusion

Poetry has an essential use as a public language fostering cultural cohesion in a civil society

As this paper comes to an end, some conclusions can be drawn about why poetry, as a literary work created by a single individual, or created as part of a public program sponsored by an organization, remains a constant and regenerative public resource. First of all, looking at the organizations that use poetry in public programs, one sees how they build on poetry as an *oral art*, as the sound of a human voice. The Clemente Course, the Free Minds Book Club, and Split This Rock all use the reading and study of poetry, either classic or contemporary, to spur discussion and inspire creative writing. When the participants read aloud or perform their own work, their voices are heard, welcomed, and affirmed by their peers and their mentors: a powerful experience for those who have felt excluded from civil society by poverty, incarceration, or their complex identity. These organizations are all predicated on inclusivity, on connecting an individual to his or her community and to the larger world.

By thus sharing and embodying cultural values of solidarity and individual dignity, they engender a sense of belonging, and a fuller conception of “ourselves as a people,” as Browning states. The same “radical humanity” that Bromwich found evinced in Wordsworth’s depiction of outcast members of society is the same “raw humanity that connects” the inmates, as Free Minds’ Libert says, or the economically disadvantaged, or the otherwise vulnerable members of our society. Each of these programs enables the sound of a single human voice, expressing thoughts and feelings, perhaps heretofore

unknown or unacknowledged, to reach and be verified by others. This is a reminder of how the founder of the humanities, the Italian poet Petrarch, found relief from the grief, anxiety and despair of an age riddled by plague and warfare by *reading poetry aloud* to himself, finding in the sound of words, a “certain innate power of sweetness” that he found to be healing.¹

Petrarch’s use of poetry as a personal resource leads to a consideration of how a poet’s voice is able to endure and gain not just an audience in their lifetime but also a larger public following afterward, and to further resound to a reader in posterity. Durability is achieved, I believe, by being a public poet, and the five poets we have considered—Virgil, Dante, Wordsworth, Senghor, and Heaney—each exemplify what that description implies. I take the term from Heaney’s use of it when he made for himself, but also helpfully for us, “a distinction between civic poetry, public poetry and political poetry, categorizing Auden’s work as ‘civic,’ Yeats’s as ‘public’ more than political and reserving the ‘political’ tag for poets like Bertolt Brecht, Adrienne Rich, Pablo Neruda, and Allen Ginsberg, who share a ‘specifically political understanding of the world.’”² One can see how, in this differentiation, civic poetry could conform to a too-narrow political sense, or too anemic an artistic sense. So too, a political poem could be so specific in its intersectionality as to fail to address an audience outside of its race, class, gender or political opinion.

¹ “Petrarch and the Origin of the Humanities” from *Defining the Humanities*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert E. Proctor (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998) 43.

² Dennis O’Driscoll, “Heaney in Public,” *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney*, Bernard O’Donoghue, ed. (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 58.

Heaney also provides a useful definition of a public poet, in the sense I am adopting, when he asserts, “What distinguishes the good poet is the ability to . . . remain true to the workings of his or her own spirit while remaining alert to the workings of the world.”³ That dual capacity is seen in each of their responses to societal upheaval, to cataclysmic events of their time that provoked or coincided with emotional conflict within themselves. Virgil grappled with Caesar’s expanding dominion and the human cost of it; Dante, with the intersection of faith, secular and sacerdotal authority amid civil strife; Wordsworth, with the place of the individual in an increasingly urban, anonymous, mass society; Senghor, with the restoration of his race and continent that had been exploited, suppressed and disregarded; and Heaney, with the immediate and lingering impact of sectarian violence upon individual lives and culture. As a result, they each developed artistic techniques enabling them to fashion and frame their reactions.

One sees how writing poetry provided these linguistically gifted and emotionally receptive individuals a psychic foothold through the tumult; what Heaney wrote of Wordsworth is applicable to himself, as well as to Virgil, Dante and Senghor, that the wholeness and depth their poems communicate was the “hard-earned reward of resolved crisis.”⁴ The crucible of their times resulted in poetic art equal to and surpassing it, enabling their cultures and societies to bear it as well. Poetry was the vehicle for processing the social, political and historical events that rippled through the personal and the collective life; it is to be noted that these five poets wrote during, around and after the

³ O’Driscoll, “Heaney,” 70.

⁴ Seamus Heaney, introduction to *The Essential Wordsworth* 1st ed William Wordsworth and Seamus Heaney (New York: Ecco Press, 1988), 5.

scaffolding of an empire, an encompassing civil structure. After an emotional experience to, or within this social order, they did the work of thinking long and deeply; in their subsequent recollections of powerful feelings, as Wordsworth defined the work of the poet, each generated an individual poetic voice while expressing certain values held in common. The poetry became a mirror of their own spirit's work and a barometer for the civil society. The values expressed and shared by these voices, whether pietas, ardor, repose, forgiveness or the affirmation of art, created the cultural cohesion that is poetry's foremost public use.

It is difficult to articulate values in public discourse that can be privately yet widely felt, and that has the ability to truly bind a community. The other means of doing so in a civil society are through political rhetoric, the addresses by government officials or aspirants to a political office, or through the opinions crafted by journalists or editorial staffs. As was noted earlier, Wordsworth discounted both, observing in his *Preface*, that poetry is superior because it uniquely "carries 'Truth alive into the heart by passion.' ... All attempts 'formally & systematically (to) lay down rules for actions of Man' are misguided because they cannot reach the human heart."⁵

A more contemporary view of poetry as a cohering public medium is expressed by poet, novelist, and critic Jay Parini: "Poetry extends the boundaries of thought by extending the boundaries of expression itself."⁶ He sees its role within civil society as the ability to "supply something that comes before the polemics, a sense of direction ... a

⁵ Stephen Gill, "The Philosophic Poet," in *The Cambridge Companion to Wordsworth*, ed. Stephen Gill (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 155.

⁶ Jay Parini, *Why Poetry Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008) 8.

place to stand where the pressure of reality will not overcome the imagination.”⁷ Poetry’s ability to uphold the imagination seems a necessity, if there is to be “the refinement of feelings” that Heaney deemed “more urgent than a reframing of policies.”⁸ Professor Doris Sommer enlarges upon this stance, by invoking the view of Friedrich Schiller’s *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, that “civic life depends upon aesthetic training to develop imagination and judgment;”⁹ she goes on to aver that “through art we reframe experience, offset prejudice, and refresh our perception of what exists. ... Through humanistic interpretation we share the civic effect.”¹⁰ The effect is not limited solely to those who read poetry: it is enough that some in civil society read poetry for the values it expresses to filter through and to infuse imaginative possibility into a cultural consciousness from which all benefit. In this sense, it can be said that poetry has an essential use as a public language in a civil society.

As values are formed by the poet’s artistic negotiations with and within the civil society, by the poet being “alert to the workings of the world,” this demands a sort of selflessness as a public poet. As Heaney has written, “The greatest poetry occurs when a certain self-forgetfulness is attained, or at least a fullness of self-possession.”¹¹ Advocating a political position too overtly, as mentioned earlier, can restrict a poet’s audience to the like-minded. Equally excluding can be a poet whose self-absorption,

⁷ Parini, 21.

⁸ O’Donoghue, Introduction, 6.

⁹ Doris Sommer, Prologue to *The Work of Art in the World: Civic Agency and Public Humanities* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 6.

¹⁰ Sommer, 10.

¹¹ Seamus Heaney, *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose, 1971-2001*, 1st American ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 250.

either as his or her own overriding subject, or in using an overly individualist esthetic, results in “the impoverishment and narrowing” that Milosz criticized in European poetry of the nineteenth and twentieth century. The poem, as it mirrors its author, must look over the shoulder and into the background.

The poet’s balancing of private and public voices is worked out through the poetic art itself, the cultivation and harnessing of the innate, alchemical power of language as it submits to “the jurisdiction of form,” the yoke of technique. Technique may or may not be tied to a print on a page, but some qualities remain constant. It recognizes the formal capacity of language to move with rhythm, be enlivened by diction, or to discourse metaphorically; this conscious and yet unselfconscious shaping enables the sharing and handing down of poetry. It is the genius of individual poets to surrender themselves to their art, and to adapt and create it anew as their voices and their urgent concerns demand. Virgil, Dante, Wordsworth, Senghor, and Heaney have all magnificently shown this, as public poets who speak to and for all and any reader.

Appendix A - Book II, *The Aeneid* by Virgil, lines 938 – 984¹

“No sooner had the old man spoken so
than sudden thunder crashed upon the left,
and through the shadows ran a shooting star,
its trail a torch of flooding light. It glides
above the highest housetops as we watch,
until the brightness that has marked its course
is buried in the woods of Ida: far
and wide the long wake of that furrow shines,
and sulphur smokes upon the land. At last,
won over by this sign, my father rises,
to greet the gods, to adore the sacred star:
‘Now my delay is done; I follow; where
you lead, I am. Gods of my homeland, save
my household, save my grandson. Yours, this omen;
and Troy is in your keeping. Yes, I yield.
My son, I go with you as your companion.’

“These were his words. But now the fire roars
across the walls; the tide of flame flows nearer.
‘Come then, dear father, mount upon my neck;
I’ll bear you on my shoulders. That is not
Too much for me. Whatever waits for us,
We both shall share one danger, one salvation.
Let young Iulus come with me, and let
My wife Creusa follow at a distance.
And servants, listen well to what I say:
along the way, just past the city walls,
in an abandoned spot there is a mound,
an ancient shrine of Ceres; and nearby
an ancient cypress stands, one that our fathers’
devotion kept alive for many years.
From different directions, we shall meet
at this one point. My father, you will carry
the holy vessels and our homeland’s gods.
Filthy with war, just come from slaughter, I
must never touch these sacred things until
I bathe myself within a running stream.’
“This said, I spread a tawny lion skin

¹ Virgil., and Allen Mandelbaum, *The Aeneid of Virgil*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971, 52 – 53.

across my bent neck, over my broad shoulders,
and then take up Anchises; small Iulus
now clutches my right hand; his steps uneven,
he is following his father; and my wife
moves on behind. We journey through dark places;
and I, who just before could not be stirred
by any weapons cast at me or by
the crowds of Greeks in charging columns, now
am terrified by all the breezes, startled
by every sound, in fear for son and father.”

Appendix B - Canto III, *Inferno* by Dante Alighieri, lines 22 – 69¹

Here sighs and lamentations and loud cries
were echoing across the starless air,
so that, as soon as I set out, I wept.

Strange utterances, horrible pronouncements,
accents of anger, words of suffering,
and voices shrill and faint, and beating hands—
all went to make a tumult that will whirl
forever through that turbid, timeless air,
like sand that eddies when a whirlwind swirls,

And I—my head oppressed with horror—said:
“Master, what is it that I hear? Who are
those people so defeated by their pain?”

And he to me: “This miserable way
is taken by the sorry souls of those
who lived without disgrace and without praise.

They now commingle with the coward angels,
the company of those who were not rebels
nor faithful to their God, but stood apart.

The heavens, that their beauty not be lessened,
have cast them out, nor will deep Hell receive them—
even the wicked cannot glory in them.”

And I: “What is it, master, that oppresses
these souls, compelling them to wail so loud?”
He answered: “I shall tell you in a few words.

Those who are here can place no hope in death,
and their blind life is so abject that they
are envious of every other fate.

The world will let no fame of theirs endure;
both justice and compassion must disdain them;
let us not talk of them, but look and pass.”

And I, looking more closely, saw a banner
that, as it wheeled about, raced on—so quick
that any respite seemed unsuited to it.

Behind that banner trailed so long a file
of people—I should never have believed

¹ Dante Alighieri, Allen Mandelbaum, and Barry Moser, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: a verse translation with introd. and commentary*. Quality Paperback Book Club edition reprinted by permission of Bantam Books, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980, 20 – 22.

that death could have unmade so many souls.

After I had identified a few,
I saw and recognized the shade of him
who made, through cowardice, the great refusal.

At once I understood with certainty;
this company contained the cowardly,
hateful to God and to His enemies.

These wretched ones, who never were alive,
went naked and were stung again, again
by horseflies and by wasps that circled them.

The insects streaked their faces with their blood,
which mingled with their tears, fell at their feet,
where it was gathered up by sickening worms.

Appendix C - “Composed Upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802”¹
by William Wordsworth

Earth has not anything to show more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty:
This City now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
Never did sun more beautifully steep
In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill;
Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
The river glideth at his own sweet will:
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still!

¹ William Wordsworth and Seamus Heaney, *The Essential Wordsworth*, 1st ed. (New York: Ecco Press, 1988) 155.

APPENDIX D - From “Prayer of the Senegalese Soldiers”¹ (guimm for two koras)
by Leopold Sedar Senghor

I

Lord, if I speak to You, You who are the Unknown Presence,
It is not because the Republic has appointed me
The good king of my people or deputy of the Four Communes.
I grew up in the heartland of Africa, at the crossroads
Of castes and races and roads, and now I am a second-class soldier
Among the humblest of soldiers.
You who listen to the smallest breaths,
Who hear the whispers at night from deep inside the huts,
Who have been called the Deaf One, You know
The recruiting machine in the harvest of highborn heads
And the docile plain has given its share of enlisted men
Who offered their godlike bodies, the glory of stadiums,
For the universal honor of mankind.

. . .

III

Between the harsh freshness of spring and the promised heat
Of summer, let us savor the ephemeral sweetness of life,
Between the flower that sheds leaves and withers
And the rustling wheat, breathe the bittersweet regret of life.
Before, yes, before the future scent of wheat and the drunken
Gathering of grapes that we won't crush,
Let us taste the sweet land of France,
Happy land! where the harsh freedom from work
Becomes radiantly sweet. We don't know if we will breathe
In the harvest for whose just cause we had fought.
If they were only going to use us! . . .

IV

Lord, listen to the offering of our militant faith
Receive the sacrifice of our bodies, the selection
Of all these gloomily perfect bodies, black victim decoys.

¹ Léopold Sédar Senghor, and Melvin Dixon, *The Collected Poetry*, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991), 50 – 52.

We offer You our bodies along with those of French peasants,
Our comrades until death once we first shook hands
And exchanged words
Gnarled bodies, tortuously scarred by work,
But solidly grown and fine as pure wheat.
So that they can grow thickly above us, these children,
The young ones for whom we are father providers,
Let us form at their feet the humus of dense rotting leaves
Where the ashes of old trunks and stalks
Like the early and late millet grains, are gathered and mistreated.
Let them grow thick in endless plains, not like the sorghum
For horses. Let the black child and the white child—
The order is alphabetical—let the children
Of Confederated France walk hand in hand
As foreseen by the poet, as the Demba-Dupont couple
On monuments to the Dead, and let the cockles of hate
Not encumber their unparalyzed gait
So that they progress and grow up smiling, but remain
As terrifying to their enemies as the union of lightening and thunder.

APPENDIX E - From “Station Island, VII”¹ by Seamus Heaney

I had come to the edge of the water,
soothed by just looking, idling over it
as if it were a clear barometer

or a mirror, when his reflection
did not appear but I sensed a presence
entering into my concentration

on not being concentrated as he spoke
my name. And though I was reluctant
I turned to meet his face and the shock

is still in me at what I saw. His brow
was blown open above the eye and blood
had dried on his neck and cheek. ‘Easy now,’

he said, ‘it’s only me. You’ve seen men as raw
after a football match . . . What time it was
when I was wakened up I still don’t know

but I heard this knocking, knocking, and it
scared me, like the phone in the small hours,
so I had the sense not to put on the light.

but looked out from behind the curtain.
I saw two customers on the doorstep
and an old landrover with the doors open

parked on the street so I let the curtain drop;
but they must have been waiting for it to move
for they shouted to come down into the shop.

She started to cry and roll round the bed,
lamenting and lamenting to herself,
not even asking who it was. “Is your head

astray, or what’s come over you?” I roared, more

¹ Seamus Heaney, *Station Island*, (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1985) 77 – 80.

to bring myself to my senses
than out of any real anger at her

for the knocking shook me, the way they kept it up,
and her whingeing and half-screeching made it worse.
All the time they were shouting, “Shop!

Shop!” so I pulled on my shoes and a sportscoat
And went back to the window and called out,
“What do you want? Could you quieten the racket

or I’ll not come down at all.” “There’s a child not well.
Open up and see what you have got—pills
or a powder or something in a bottle,”

one of them said. He stepped back off the footpath
so I could see his face in the street lamp
and when the other moved I knew them both.

But bad and all as the knocking was, the quiet
hit me worse. She was quiet herself now,
lying dead still, whispering to watch out.

At the bedroom door I switched on the light.
“It’s odd they didn’t look for a chemist.
Who are they anyway at this hour of night?”

she asked me, with the eyes standing in her head.
‘I know them to see,’ I said, but something
made me reach and squeeze her hand across the bed

before I went downstairs into the aisle
of the shop. I stood there, going weak
in the legs. I remember the stale smell

of cooked meat or something coming through
as I went to open up. From then on
you know as much about it as I do.’

‘Did they say nothing?’ ‘Nothing. What would they say?’
‘Were they in uniform? Not masked in any way?’
‘They were barefaced as they would be in the day,

shites thinking they were the be-all and the end-all.’

‘Not that it is any consolation
but they were caught,’ I told him, ‘and got jail.’

Big-limbed, decent, open-faced, he stood
forgetful of everything now except
whatever was welling up in his spoiled head,

beginning to smile. ‘You’ve put on a bit of weight
since you did your courting in that big Austin
you got the loan of on a Sunday night.’

Through life and death he had hardly aged.
There always was an athlete’s cleanliness
shining off him, and except for the ravaged

forehead and the blood, he was still the same
rangy midfielder in a blue jersey
and starched pants, the one stylist on the team,

the perfect, clean, unthinkable victim.
‘Forgive the way I have lived indifferent—
forgive my timid circumspect involvement,’

I surprised myself by saying. ‘Forgive
my eye,’ he said, ‘all that’s above my head.’
And then a stun of pain seemed to go through him

and he trembled like a heatwave and faded.

APPENDIX F - “It Couldn’t Be Done” by Edward A. Guest¹

Somebody said that it couldn’t be done,
But he with a chuckle replied
That “maybe it couldn’t,” but he would be one
Who wouldn’t say so till he’d tried.
So he buckled right in with the trace of a grin
On his face. If he worried he hid it.
He started to sing as he tackled the thing
That couldn’t be done, and he did it.

Somebody scoffed: “Oh, you’ll never do that;
At least no one ever has done it”;
But he took off his coat and he took off his hat,
And the first thing we knew he’d begun it.
With a lift of his chin and a bit of a grin
Without any doubting or quiddit,
He started to sing as he tackled the thing
That couldn’t be done, and he did it.
There are thousands to tell you it cannot be done,

There are thousands to prophesy failure;
There are thousands to point out to you, one by one,
The dangers that wait to assail you.
But just buckle in with a bit of a grin,
Just take off your coat and go to it;
Just start to sing as you tackle the thing
That “cannot be done,” and you’ll do it.

¹ Free Minds Book Club & Writing Workshop, Resources for Educators,
<https://freemindsbookclub.org/resources/for-educators> (Accessed December 15, 2018.)

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