

Good Poetry, Bad Poetry, and Good Poetry Read Badly

by G. Kim Blank (February 2015)

“One great poet is a masterpiece of Nature which another not only ought to study but must study.”

—Percy Shelley, from the Preface to *Prometheus Unbound*

1. A Life Before Us

Without venturing too far into mired arguments about taste and aesthetics—or fully engaging critiques of canonization that descend from political correctness—is it difficult to recognize great poetry? Were there that many poets in the times of Donne, Herbert, Dryden, and Pope who wrote nearly so well? Robert Southey is obviously not in the same league as his arch-detractor, Byron. Hopkins trumps Patmore every time. How many poets possess Wordsworth’s deep eloquence?

And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean, and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man,
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.

Whitman, Yeats, Eliot, and Stevens—their significance is palpable, and more so with every reading. Spender, a decent poet, does not stand up to Auden, an exceptional poet. Then there are a few magisterial figures like Chaucer, Milton, and Shakespeare. Marianne Moore has rightly risen (and may still be rising), while John Frederick Nims (you’re right: who?) seems to have rightly sunk altogether. And in our own time, and still among us, are Derek Walcott and John Ashbery, who unquestionably lean toward posterity, with Geoffrey Hill standing at the gates, despite what seems to be some willful obscurity in his later work. Seamus Heaney,

sadly, is no longer with us, but his place among the greats has been certain for some time now.

Those listed above do not, of course, constitute anything approaching an inclusive list of great poets. And a few swerve in and out of greatness over the course of their writings. But surely it is possible for this to be true: despite the self-congratulatory, inclusive strummings of cultural relativism, practice in reading poetry does tutor us in the value of a persistent reckoning with enduring voices, those masterpieces of Nature to whom Shelley defers. These poets at their best have more to say and finer ways to say it. There is phrasing, a metaphor, an image, an association of sound and sense that pulls you in; there is an idea or a feeling that immediately sticks. To massage Eliot's pronouncements on the metaphysical poets, great poetry often turns thought into forceful, profound experience, rather than offering mere rumination or sentiment, which is why—and Eliot is surely right—work that may be poetically sincere is not always poetically urgent, sweeping, or reflective in ways that cause sustained reflection and reaction. So too may great poets be motivated by occasion, but the best are never tied to it, and often overheard in their work are intricate, discerning, and sometimes playful conversations struck with other formidable voices and ideas beyond their time and place, anticipating significant conversations to come. And, once more borrowing from Eliot (who suggested that strong literary theft was preferable to weak borrowing), great poetry is often recognized in advance of understanding it.

The greater poem lays out a kind of life before us through its voice, movement, and form, and it invites us to understand and reunderstand it. We should not be surprised by this, since, for example, a great painting seems to demand that we turn to it again and again, to see once more yet once more differently