

Three Poems for Poets

by [Esther Cameron](#) (April 2025)



Nascien travels in a cloud to the Spinning Island (Illustration from 1270-1290 french manuscript)

1) The Bard Liadan Considers the Information of a Time Traveler

*The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars
But in ourselves, that we are underlings.* –Shakespeare,
Julius Caesar

Let me be certain I have understood you.
You tell me that you have no guilds of bards
pledged to convene and sing to one another
in sacred measures of what has transpired
between the full and dark, the dark and full,
each offering the fragments of their vision
until an image of the hour take shape,
which the most skilled then set before the people
to put them on their guard against the guileful
and rectify the laws and names of things?
That poets vie in speaking idle words,
promising nothing, making nothing happen?
That for their labors most have no reward
save to be printed on a page perused
by none, except their rivals studious
of the judge's mind, that they too may be printed?
O chone, the harp of concord thus untuned
and bardcraft made into a trade for fools!
It is the dark age you must live in surely,
the age our eldest bards foretold last solstice
in such a cold as no one could recall.

But, traveler, if you hear me, as I you,
and if your well of wit is not quite dry,
will you not now return and tell your comrades
the time has come to win word's honor back,
reforge the canon and the sacred forms,
reconvene the counsels of the wise,
send forth your strongest voices to beseech
the people to return to reason's measure?
The words of all who say so will be deeds,
worthy of space in the memory of the gods;
the rest is vanity, the trash of time

which time will sweep away.

2) L'art pour l'art

*You will softly and suddenly vanish away
And never be met with again.* –Lewis Carroll, *The Hunting of the Snark*

Let's face it, Publius: if yesterday
the tribe of bards had without notice gone
missing from Homo sapiens' array,

if in this continental tract not one
poetic soul were scribbling anywhere,
the loss would scarcely be remarked upon.

–True, the *New Yorker* would no longer wear
a verbal nosegay every sevennight,
the *Atlantic* breathe a sigh for us, but they're

moribund anyway. Space being tight,
most forums axed that frill some time ago:
College English, that ought to do us right,

two posh alumni magazines I know
that used to print a good word now and then
stopped that within the last two years or so.

–True, when Inauguration comes again
no streamers of Free Verse would decorate
the new display of marketable men;

but in our Union's disillusioned state
we're scarcely slated there for further use.
For the rest, we'd quietly evaporate.

Yes, all of our Creative Writing crews,
our contests, workshops, magazines, small presses
whose output bards exclusively peruse

to find what style an Editor caresses
that they may trim their words accordingly
and dot their vitae with suchlike successes—

no one would ask “Where are they?” For, you see,
all these were for our benefit alone,
our little self-consuming industry,

and will be otiose when we are gone.
They merely served to tame that element
which might have been the slowest to condone

misuse of words; that might have made ferment
some genuine love of freedom in the crowd
that has been satisfied, in the event,

with discount houses, big athletics, loud
music, and the permission to do worse,
while poets stand by mumbling with heads bowed

words that will not disturb the universe,
being not rhetorical and not didactical
nor sentimental, but prolixly terse,

anxious to show that they intend no practical
consequence, for that would be below ‘em,
since they have found that aimlessness is tactical,

and the pursuit of purposes would slow ‘em
on pure Parnassus’ slope, toward the acclaim
of judges who can’t quote a single poem,

stanza, or line of theirs. Such now is fame;
for when the "implied reader"'s but the censor,
then everything begins to sound the same,

although, deodorized, that famous sensor
Hemingway spoke of seems not to detect it.
Such is the trick they've run upon us. When, sir,

d'you think they hatched and managed to perfect it?
—Ask when vanity was not a lure
that without fail could lead us to be shechted!

And then we have to live somehow, somewhere.
We are not happy off the reservation.
O Publius! I doubt that there's a cure,

what purpose serves this tedious recitation
of what all have contracted not to know?
'Tis but the fume of black bile's fermentation.

And yet I can't help wishing we would show
some fight, some "all for one and one for all,"
some statements as "We hold these to be so,"

some new convention and resolve to call
things by their names and fashion consequence,
some interruption of the funeral

of wisdom and of simple common sense.
— Well, Publius, let me not lose a friend
by importuning you across the fence

that makes good neighbors, each of whom must tend
to their own business. In that, I'm the same
as anyone. But if you should perpend

and think "why not?"—I'll have you know I'm game.

1999

Hamlet Proposes

Words that are things. –Byron

This is a thought that began with an act: one autumn in Munich in a bare student apartment I pinned to the wall a set of snapshots I'd taken of friends in Berkeley, the year preceding, in such a way that they formed one image, a whole made of wholes.

Doubtless you've done the like. But I was then reading Anfortas, whose face, clipped out of the paper, appeared at the lower right, and his voice, unheard yet heard, sounded hollowly through the silence of a place where I knew no one. As though in an empty hall on the stage a lone actor stood, a dark space curving around him, and spoke. A monodrama, yet every line, every word, every inflection and every silence implied the others—Where were they? and what action had he been trying to start? After the denouement, I began to reread the classics, the moderns. At every turn, as if from under the ground, I heard his comment. Until there were no more solo voices, no authors of separate worlds, only the cast of one play, affected, affecting, and all caught in the drift of one current, and I felt called upon to climb on the stage myself, like Hamlet up on that platform, to meet the ghost there, to answer

its summons, swear its deep oath and get the others to swear.
Ai, it's a pity there was no contemporary Cervantes
to follow along and record my discomfitures as they've
occurred

ever since. Nevertheless, *eppur*, the idea's a good one.
Years later came to my hand a copy of Vincent Millay's
Conversation at Midnight—a work that has never been lucky:
after the manuscript was burnt with the author's house
she tried to reconstruct it from memory. Then everyone panned
it:

the flapper poet, they said, will ein Philosopher sein,
wants to be not one man but seven men all convening
from different compass-points to settle the fate of the world!
A dialogue, or a play in verse where each characters uses
a different verse-form, as if the author were plural.

(Indeed,
from the innumerable styles I have worn in the last three
decades,
though without turning my coat, this I am bound to admit,
someone might almost conclude that *I* was plural.)

Why not,
then, think of our various voices as parts in an ongoing
drama,
authored by no one—and yet we would suppose that behind
all of us there is One Will to some wholeness beyond the poem.
Could be more fun, don't you think, than Dungeons and Dragons...
Swear.

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Esther Cameron is a dual citizen of Israel and the US, now living in Jerusalem. She is the founding editor of *The Deronda Review*. Her poems and essays have appeared here and there; she has published her *Collected Works* on Amazon and has had one book published by an academic press—*Western Art and Jewish*

Presence in the Work of Paul Celan (Lexington Books, 2014).

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