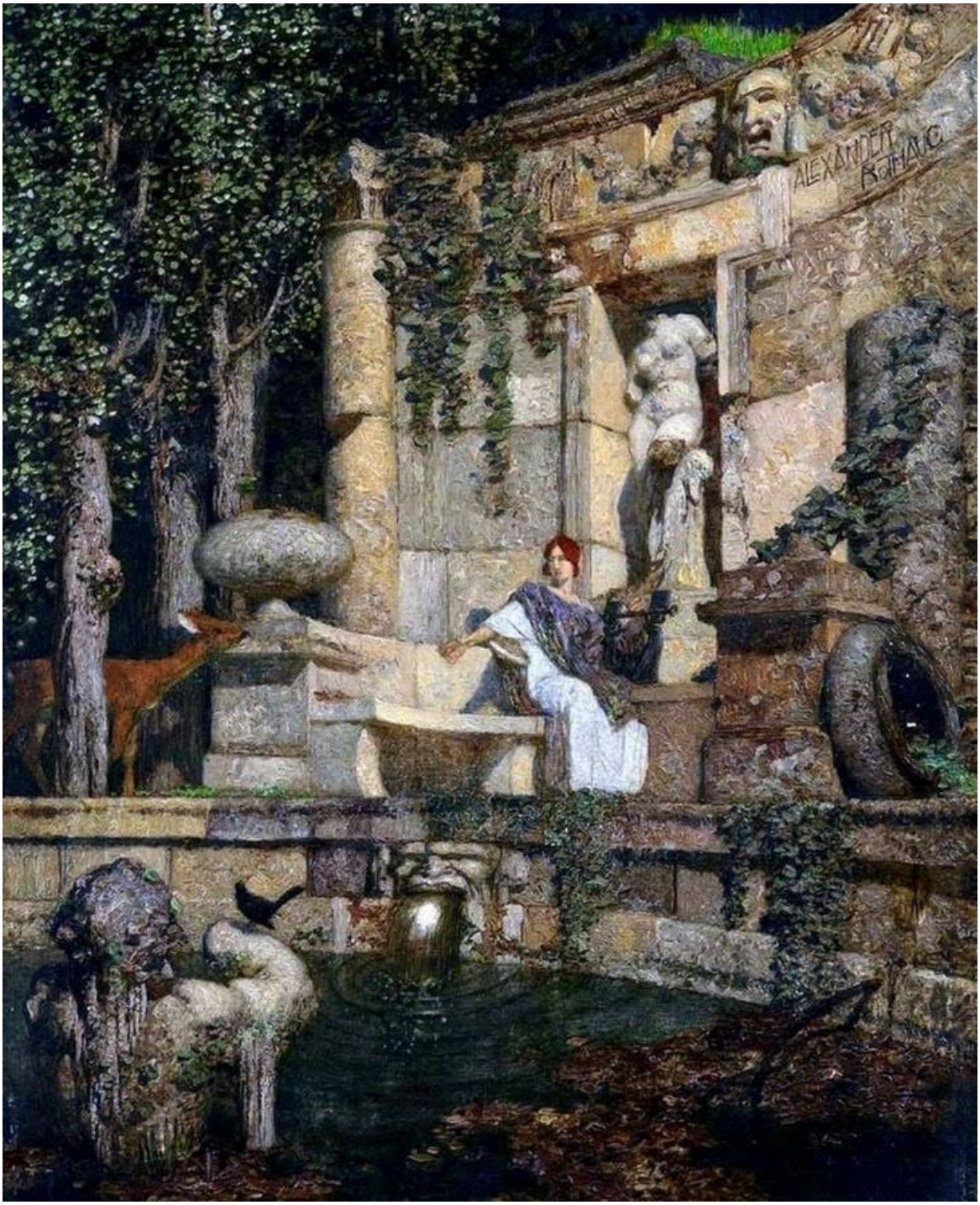
What Killed Poetry? Or, When the Heart Lost Its Voice

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



Poetry (Alexander Rothaug)

Some years back, it might have been around the turn of the century, *Harvard Magazine* ran an article about Longfellow's Civil War poem "Christmas Bells," which was eventually turned into the old familiar carol "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day." The article discussed the minor changes made to the poem and its musical setting. It concluded, oddly enough, by calling the work "a moving poem for our time."

That issue, as I remember, also included a contemporary poem. All I remember about that poem is the thought that it in no way resembled anything by Longfellow, but was a typical poem of (if not for) "our time." That is, it doubtless did not rhyme, and any feeling that might have prompted it was carefully hedged with irony. If anyone had submitted a poem in the spirit of Longfellow, the editors would certainly not have accepted it. Shortly afterward, *Harvard Magazine* discontinued publishing poetry altogether. *American Scholar* did the same, around the same time.

The *Harvard Magazine* article was heartening in a way, as a demonstration that even if poetry has been killed (per Joseph Epstein's famous article, "Who Killed Poetry," published already in 1988), it has not really changed. People, even people with university educations, are still capable of responding to a poem like "Christmas Bells." This is because such poems are grounded in the human nervous system. (I'm thinking of another important essay, Frederick Turner's "The Neural Lyre.")

Traditional poetry is tied to pulse and respiration, it creates regularities that the mind-and-body welcomes, that reassure and strengthen. Moreover, within these regularities it feels safe, both for the transmitter and the receiver, to convey emotion.

Another example: In conversation with a woman who had had only a high school education (probably in the '70's), I happened to mention Walt Whitman, and drew a blank. Finally I mentioned "O

Captain! My Captain!" Of course, she remembered that! And from her tone I gathered that the poem had moved her. Paul Fussell's *Poetic Meter & Poetic Form,* while paying due reverence to Whitman's free verse, mentions "O Captain! My Captain!" with "loathing."

I find myself thinking also of Joyce Kilmer's "Trees." I'm not going to say it's my favorite poem. But it surely does not deserve quite the obloquy attached to it by so many free-verse aficionados aiming to demonstrate their intellectual superiority by mentioning it with derision. (Perhaps it is singled out, when there is such a vast pool of criticizable verse to choose from, because it does note that there is a Poet greater than any of us.) Similarly, in the 1960's, any mention of Edna St. Vincent Millay had to be made with the same purpose. (Feminism may have fixed that a little—one of its few positive achievements.)

Epstein's title, "Who Killed Poetry," is a bit facetious. I don't suppose he imagined someone going after the Muse with an axe. But although he examines the symptoms the phenomenon of poetry's decline, and briefly discusses the role of media and academia, he doesn't quite ask the question *what* killed poetry.

I think the answer does lie in large part with the media, or more precisely, with the peculiar temptations that the media offer to the human psyche.

Consider that passage in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* where Stephen returns to the family home to learn that the family is going to be evicted *again.* Following this announcement, the younger children begin to sing together.

> *The voice of his youngest brother from the farther side of the fireplace began to sing the air Oft in the Stilly Night. One by one the others took up the air until a full*

> *choir of voices was singing. They would sing so for hours, melody after melody, glee after glee, till the last pale light died down on the horizon, till the first dark nightclouds came forth and night fell….*
>
> *He heard the choir of voices in the kitchen echoed and multiplied through an endless reverberation of the choirs of endless generations of children and heard in all the echoes an echo also of the recurring note of weariness and pain. All seemed weary of life even before entering upon it. And he remembered that Newman had heard this note also in the broken lines of Virgil giving utterance, like the voice of Nature herself, to that pain and weariness yet hope of better things which has been the experience of her children in every time.*

"Oft in the Stilly Night" –I hope the reader remembers it–s a song with words by Thomas Moore, a popular poet of the 19th century whom Byron esteemed highly. It used to be sung a lot in the days when friends and families often sang together and, in so doing, gained some strength to face adversity. In the piano bench at my grandmother's house there was a little book of such songs, with chords for piano. The scene described by Joyce would have taken place before 1904. A decade or so later, someone would have switched on the radio.

Radio, and recorded music, offer great advantages to the hearer. It is obviously much more pleasurable to listen to a recorded performance of the "Pathetique" sonata by Schnabel or Rubinstein than to hear your older sister's rendition of the same (let alone to have to hear her practicing it). And in a recording of choral music, no one is going to sing out of tune. The trouble is that recorded performances do not fulfill one of the purposes for which artistic performances evolved in the first place. They do not bring people together.

Even without music, poetry was once shared in the family—read by the fireside in long winter evenings, quoted in conversation. Reading was not always an entirely solitary occupation. And the family as audience influenced the content and spirit of poetry.

Consider Longfellow's "The Song of Hiawatha." According to Native American legend, Hiawatha was one of the founders of the Iroquois Confederacy, a great peacemaker among the tribes. At the start of his career, however, his wife and three daughters were killed by a political opponent. Longfellow set out to write about this figure, whose peacemaking achievements must have appealed to him. But Longfellow had three daughters he was very fond of (see his poem "The Children's Hour"), and he probably could not bring himself to write about the deaths of Hiawatha's daughters. As if, along with that motif, the whole political topic went by the board, the poem is a patchwork of rather irrelevant inventions. Yet for many years it was a beloved classic—perhaps because the affection that *prevented* Longfellow from writing the real story, somehow shone through. (My mother read it to me when I was nine or so, and many years later its rhythm echoed in a longish poem of mine.)

A further example: One day toward the end of my father's life, when he was on oxygen and confused much of the time, my mother read him Millay's "Recuerdo" ("We were very tired, we were very merry—We had gone back and forth all night upon the ferry…"). My father smiled and said it was a good poem. For a moment the poem had brought back their youth.

It is possible to teach the rules of prosody. But there are no rules for how to write a poem that will do this sort of thing. In recent decades there has been a kind of revival of formal verse (after a stretch of years when, as a creative writing professor informed me, "no one" was writing sonnets). But the voice of traditional poetry has never quite been recovered.

One more story: some years ago, after a particularly hard Midwestern winter, I wrote, and put a tune to, a poem that began “How sweet to the ear is the robin’s first song / In late March when the days just begin to be long.” I sent it, without the tune, to various contacts. Two of them wrote their own tunes to it. But when I submitted it to a formalist website, the editor refused, on the grounds that it used Anapests. I guess the anapest has been used a lot in a kind of folksy doggerel which I was actually half-consciously imitating. But why should we consider ourselves above it? (It’s also used, of course, in Byron’s “The Destruction of Sennacherib.”)

There is, to my ear at least, a kind of “generic” voice that has sounded through English poetry through the centuries, beneath the hallmarks of individual styles and the fashions of different periods, even the differences among the respective sectors of society which the poems primarily addressed (courtiers and boon companions, as well as middle-class families). It is, perhaps, the voice of the audience in the poem, testifying to the fact that the poem addressed some society, some set of people who did not define themselves as poets, and to whose basic humanity the poem could break through, to whom poetry was one way of giving their lives meaning or at least a bit of importance.

This voice breaks off when poetry is written primarily for the editor or the contest judge or even the fellow-participants in a “workshop” –those whose role is not to experience poetry but to judge it. It is difficult, in the position of judge, to retain the humility that makes the *experience* of poetry even possible. And is difficult for a poet facing hearers who are primarily judges, not to become guarded.

Could that voice ever be recovered?

It seems to me that the recovery of poetry could be tied to the recovery of the family. Since the invention of

technologies that allow the voice of the marketplace to sound in the home, the family has been attacked in a systematic even if not deliberate process, through the promotion of immediate gratification and built-in obsolescence, which are inherently opposed to poetry's innate tendency to try to hold things fast, to create permanence. Over the years people have let so many things go, even to the point of losing their grip on their sexual identity, not to mention their sanity. Perhaps those who begin to come to their senses, to realize that we need to relearn how to hang onto things, will also realize that poetry is their friend.

The resurrection of poetry would require a realization that it is not just a matter of pleasure which can be more cheaply obtained by other means, but of human functions that atrophy without it. Besides drawing people together, poetry strengthens memory, concentration, and judgment; it helps to crystallize perceptions that otherwise dissolve in the flux of a semiconsciousness that avoids confrontations, borne along by the soupy stream of media input. And this, ultimately, has an effect on the quality of political discourse. Sure, there have been bad poems, poems written in bad causes, appealing to bad impulses. There are nasty rhyming chants; we still hear them today, unfortunately. But the answer to those is not no poetry but better poetry, just as the only answer to bad men with guns is good men with better guns.

So as not to have to end on a military metaphor (though it is really time we understood that there is a war on consciousness going on), I'll mention that since modern inventions have made a good deal of physical exertion superfluous, people have realized the need to maintain their physical functions through exercise. Poetry is exercise for functions essential to our psychic and social life. It must come back, and it can and will.

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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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