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THE ROCKY MARRIAGE OF POETRY AND PRAYER

On this my 71st birthday, certain things have come together in me, as is the wont of elders, especially when also theologians, as it is the task of theologians to bring all things together on earth with all things in heaven. I was once introduced as "The Connection-Maker," & I've been too proud of it ever since--occasionally warning myself with the triad that (1) coherence is no proof of reality, (2) the power to "unite all things" is God's alone (as in the cosmic Christianity of Col. & Eph.), & (2) the cosmizing (unifying) gift can be honed & used without integrity--as in the case of Sinclair Lewis' ELMER GANTRY (H, B, & C/27, Signet/67), 198: "Elmer, being trained theologically, had to weave all the elements--dogma, poetry to the effect that God's pallete held all the sunsets or ever the world began, confessions of the dismally damned, and stories of Maine barn-dances--into one ringing whole" (+230: "He had learned how to assemble Jewish texts, Greek philosophy, and Middle-Western evangelistic anecdotes into a sermon. And he had learned that poverty is blessed, but that bankers make the best deacons.")....And so, with that reinforcement for my humility, I boldly make the following linkages:

1. I hold the Platonic androgyne (literally, "man-woman") to be the ancient Greeks' profoundest myth. It points not only to the underlying unity yet conflicted ("rocky marriage") complexity of the human sexes but also to the undifferentiatedness of sacred & secular *in illud tempore*, in prehistoric & early-historic times. Once, theater was inseparable from worship, poetry was **inseparable** from prayer. (Hardly a recapitulation, but my first published poem as a teener was a prayer.)

2. It's increasingly clear that the splitting of the atom, the separation of its components, was not an entirely good idea, though a good one. Ditto for the separation of theater from worship, of poetry from prayer, of secular from sacred, &--yes--of state from church. When a woman & a man have separate & secure identities, their relationship can be mutually freeing & enriching: so when state & church, **poetry & prayer**, theater & worship have separate & mature identities. Story: Two responses of Krister Stendahl (immediate ex-bishop of Stockholm) to me last week: (1) "When church & state are not separate, people go to church chiefly as to a government office--for example, the post-office. They wouldn't want to dispense with post-office & church, but they wouldn't see any point to going to either unless you had business there--in the case of the church, baptism, wedding, funeral." Separation of state & church makes religious praxis optional, thus giving religion more reality. (2) With religion & politics unseparated, the Swedish people are diffident about religious language; so when I wrote a prayer for the funeral of our assassinated PM, Olaf Palme, people on the street said, "Thank you, Bishop, for your poem" (not "prayer").

3. But as the current metaphor has it, the "downside" of the prayer/poetry separation is the tendency to let the separation deteriorate into **divorce**--poetry becoming profane (degeneratedly secular), prayer becoming banal (without literary merit, despite the superb modeling of the Psalms).

Consider, side by side, JFK's poetry inaugural & GHWB's prayer inaugural, & the secular responses thereto:

(1) Appropriate in each case. JFK wasn't much for religion (or even morality) but was for culture; GHWB, though cultured, isn't as much for culture as for religion.

(2) At **JFK**'s inaugural, Robt. Frost read his for-the-occasion "The Gift Outright," about our relation not to God but to "the land." The USA should honor poetry by having, for each inaugural, a new poet laureate. Poetry can help rescue & redeen us from our materialism & narcissism. The press adulated JFK for featuring Poet Frost.

(3) The press did not praise **Bush** for featuring Billy Graham even though it was news, new, that the same clergyperson led in enveloping prayers, beginning & ending the inaugural & even though we need prayer even more than poetry!

The forgotten poet at the inaugural

Margaret Regan

George Bush's inaugural had all of the pomp and circumstance of any great affair of state. Even the weather cooperated. Yet something was missing from the brief ceremony, something that has been missing from this American institution since John F. Kennedy's day — a poet.

Too many years have passed since the bitter cold afternoon of January 20, 1961, when Robert Frost stood up to read "The Gift Outright," a poem especially composed for the inaugural.

"The land was ours before we were the land's," he read across the nation in his gravelly voice. "She was our land more than a 100 years/ Before we were her people."

As all the country's dignitaries and the young president paused, poetry took a central place on the platform of a democratic nation. But in all the elections since, we have forgotten our poets. In the 5th century B.C., no Athenian statesman worth his laurel would omit an invocation of the gods. Yet 2,500 years later we have remembered little from this grandfather of all democracies. We live dangerously when we forget our art on such auspicious occasions.

America has always had a hate-love affair with poetry. Although we may recognize the most famous of our poets — Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman and Robert Frost — few of us read poetry and no one in America — as far as we know — seems to die from it.

Despite the recent glasnost in the Soviet Union in which some writers have had the freedom to publish their works, Russian poets are accustomed to paying a high price for poetry. Officials of the party take poetry so seriously that dissenting writers are imprisoned, silenced or exiled.

When Osip Mandelstam scribbled a few lines in 1937 about Stalin's treatment of the peasants, he disappeared from Samatikha, 200 kilometers east of Moscow, and was never seen alive again. More recently, on Human Rights Day in December, leaders of a demonstration were arrested for merely lifting their hats before a statue of Pushkin, Russia's most revered poet.

But here in America where we are free to protest, criticize or lament, where Langston Hughes can plead in "Let America be America Again," "(There's never been equality for me,/ Nor freedom in the 'homeland of the free')" and Nikki Giovanni can apotheosize Revolutionary Dreams, poets are worse than imprisoned: They are ignored.

Instituting the title of poet laureate in 1986 was a small act of national recognition. Robert Penn Warren, the first poet to hold this distinction, was honored nationally. Richard Wilbur was given the title in 1987, and our current poet laureate is Howard Nemerov. Although these writers are appointed by the librarian of Congress, none of them was invited to read from their works at the inauguration.

Perhaps poetry has grown too quaint for public display. Writer Annie Dillard believes it has been reduced to the moment when the potato sprouts. Someone will eventually come along to explode its domain back open, she predicts. But while we're waiting for this new age, we need to crack the stereotype of poetry as an esoteric art.

We have assigned poetry to the English class, where it perishes in a chalk-choked death. Is it possible we esteem it too highly, making it into a porcelain language too fragile for everyday use? The strange dance we make around poetry may be a measure of national adolescence. We are still awkward around the poignant, still giggling near the profound.

But poetry, like any craft, is less mystery than muscle. Like any labor, it demands time and concentration and more than a little luck. Heaving language into meter may be as strenuous but no harder than hauling heavy furniture up steep stairs.

But poets can be a barometer of the political weather. In the early '60s, Frost noted that true nationalism is rooted in personal sacrifice, not in making demands, echoing Kennedy's aphorism, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country."

Likewise poet laureate Nemerov, in his poem, "Angel and Stone" examines man's limited vision of life, invoking those "to whom an age is a wave,/ A nation the spray thrown from its crest."

The poet exclaims how watched over we are by "The Lord of everything," how humble man appears from this higher view. His excellent verse and sentiment was so similar to President Bush's belief that his poetry would have suited the inaugural aptly.

When a country is heartened by its achievements or by its promise, it should sing an authentic song. Omitting our poet laureate from the grandest celebration of free elections in the world is forgetting an important part of our history. Great occasions demand great verse.

"If you do not read poetry," wrote Anatole Broyard, "you will never have your heart broken by language."

Our lack of public poetry weakens us as a nation. We are diminished without its art. Poetry exacts precision from a culture, perhaps even maturity. But most important of all, it requires that we stop for one crucial moment and listen well.

Margaret Regan lives in Brewster.

So they say

"Kindness is in our power, but fondness is not." — Samuel Johnson

□

"History is always repeating itself, but each time the price goes up." — Anonymous.

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"Human beings are the only creatures able to behave irrationally in the name of reason." — Ashley Montagu