

PREFACE

Joe Wenderoth

Acting as the editor of this issue has been a great opportunity for me — a sort of speed-dating. I don't read very much contemporary American poetry, so it's given me a chance to get reacquainted a little. I stopped reading it at least 10 years ago, on account of ceasing to understand (and beginning to be irked by) its endless self-celebration. In America, the named, endowed, and variously lauded poets are allowed to pretend that the society values their work — to pretend, that is, that they are *the poets* of the society, as though society involved poetry, and as though they paid their bills with their royalties and performance fees. Well, the poet who can live on the proceeds of her poetry is rare, to say the least. We don't pay poets to write (and read aloud) poetry in America; we pay poets to *teach* poetry. I suppose we are being hopeful? That is, maybe the next generation of poets (the ones we are teaching now, say) will *break through* and actually get to *be* poets, rather than Teachers of future poets? And maybe when that happens, the whole American poetry world will no longer need to be subsidized by the increasingly pathetic and self-righteous American education industry? It's amazing that the allotting of these subsidies still conjures — *somehow* — an aura of prestige for the books and the awards they allow for; indeed, this aura is surely what drives a good deal of the few sales that are made. Meanwhile, poets in the poetry world are *regularly* making pronouncements about one another that *completely* contradict the judgment of society (a judgment pronounced in actions rather than words, i.e., a more *severe* judgment). A quite large percentage of the folks in the society have never read or heard contemporary poetry, and basically cannot conceive of its existence — while those who know it exists stay away from it in super-megadoves. I'd say most poetry readings have a nonattendance rate of one hundred percent of the society, more or less.

Ironically, American poems exist quite apart from American society — stranded in poetry world — while the poet herself, working as a Teacher of future poets rather than a poet, is regularly mired in the contrived *social* situations a University will allow for (fewer and fewer by the minute). She must become an institutionally purposed social creature *and be a poet at the same time*. This seems

backward to me; poets *should not* have to work a job in which they are constantly thrust into governance of contrived (commercial) social situations, while poems *should* be absorbed *into* the society they're open to being overheard by. Sure, if one is a poet, one inevitably enjoys, for a while, being a Teacher of poetry . . . with its captive audience of the few, the grave, the similarly inclined. One might even be able to enjoy it indefinitely . . . but that isn't really the point. There are plenty of ways to *enjoy* the situation if you've been lucky enough (or more likely possessed of enough cultural capital and/or explicit connections) to get into it. One might even figure out a way to be hopeful that the next generation of poets will actually be poets rather than Teachers of future poets. The only drawback I see to having this kind of hope in place is that it rather carelessly and arrogantly overlooks a gigantic problem — gigantic, that is, for anyone who actually cares about poetry *and* America. Fact: Americans don't care about poetry, *especially* contemporary American poetry. Contemporary American poetry, to be sure, is not a part of American life. There is a system in place that allows it to be published and then forced on students in the process of their "education," but that's all, that system. Just imagine if poetry was removed from that system — if the University no longer subsidized and heaped prestige on the unread poetry books, and no longer sold *how to* sessions, no longer formed a community of *how to*. What might contemporary American poetry become if it was no longer subsidized by our Universities? All the Teachers of future poets would have to get other jobs, jobs in which it would be difficult, if not impossible, to continue to call themselves poets. The society itself would have to determine who the poets are (if any) and what place poetry might have in the life of Americans (if any).

Many contemporary American poets implicitly blame the public, I think, for the lack of interest in contemporary American poetry. Perhaps that isn't a conscious thing, but how else could the public's rather clear and severe assessment be so quickly and easily dismissed as a more or less irrelevant point. There are surely many things to blame the American public for, but *not caring about contemporary American poetry* might just not be one of them. The bar, in contemporary American poetry, is routinely set so low (subsidy being like steroids) that its "feats" tend to be rather hard to discern for the laity (blurbs are commonly needed to bring them out of concealment). With *so many* great and important contemporary American poets, I don't know that I can blame the public very much

for not buying the whole situation. At the same time, my work as a Teacher of poetry has me reading poetry — contemporary and ancient, amateur and laureated — fairly often. Then there is my personal relationship with poetry, which stretches from college, where I first encountered a poem, to today. As I became possessed by the effort, the *need*, to find (or allow for) poetic speech, it was implicitly understood that another need went along with it: a desperate need to find and get to know great poems. This personal history of encounters is a series of events occurring inside and outside — mostly outside — of my job, i.e., *all* of the poems I've had significant interaction with, particularly the ones I've been compelled to reread, and then to read again, and again and again — trying always to get closer to them, to hear them better, trying to allow them to have me — to expose me, my fate. I balk a little at the question — what poems do you love most? I always rephrase the question as: What poems are in the constellation of poems that *has* you? That's a much better way to ask the question. I'd feel comfortable listing the foods that I "love," but my relationship to poems is not nearly so simple. Love and pleasure are involved, somehow, but there is so much more to it. These poems, after all, *have* me because they work as keys to accessing a sense of my own fate, which is the fate of a human being. That which allows access to the fate of a human being is not well described by the word "lovable." No, these poems, in the process of our relationship, have held, hurt, indicted, pleased, shaken, assured, deceived, heartened, and destroyed me. They've changed — and continue to change — how and who I imagine myself to be.

This is not to say that they have any particular lessons to impart. "Poetry is of no particular importance," as Allen Grossman wrote. My undergrads inevitably mishear this quote, which does not say that poetry is unimportant. Poetry, Grossman is suggesting, is tremendously important — it just has no *particular* importance. You don't write a poem to achieve this, that, or the other thing — or if you *do*, God bless you. This is not to say that a poem can't *have* a particular importance; it is rather to say that a poem can't *intend* to have a particular importance. The poetic cannot endure the fingers of the propagandist or any other purpose-driven soul. I've come to think of a poem as a sort of person — a potentially respect-worthy other. Of such an other, one does not ask: "What does she mean?" or "What has she been created to accomplish?" The question is absurd when applied to a person. It should be understood as equally absurd

when applied to a poem. It can only be asked of a poem if poems are mistaken for social actions, i.e., someone's effort to impart something to someone else (often by secret code!). Poems are sites of a double loneliness — one aloneness in the presence of an other aloneness. Poems are secret persons — persons conceived of by one who is alone, and then met with by one (a reader) who is alone. As such, poems are never heard — they are *overheard*. A poem's being overheard allows each of the persons met in the encounter to remain alone (nonsocial, *pure*). If this overhearing has no particular use, though, wherein lies its appeal?

Its appeal lies in the opportunity it offers — the opportunity to be in the presence of an other's aloneness in its *narrowest straits*, pressed upon for a believable recapitulation of her life, i.e., where she has come from, toward what she has gone, who she has purported to be along the way, and in which direction is she headed now. The reader of a poem is therefore made witness to an impossible other — impossible because she exists (speaks) as a completed system — something a living person can never be or do. Poems are persons who have given up the right to be alive (i.e., to change what they have to say) in exchange for the potential to live longer than their source bodies, and to speak with the insight of one who has seen the whole of a human story. This wholeness is imaginary, but oddly modeled on the wholeness that *reality* holds in store for every living person. The poet is driven, in the course of events, to try to imagine that oncoming wholeness. The poem, as a kind of person, is not *something* a reader *uses* — it's *someone* the reader might *be* with, spend time in the presence of, get to know. A poem is what Allen Grossman called "eidetic exemplification," *eidōs* meaning form, type, essence, species. Thus, he's saying that poems exemplify potential human countenances: forms (shape, outline) of presence in the present. Poems are (or at least they should be) literally legendary persons. One spends time with them, listens to how and what they have to say, not to *deduce* some hidden moral, but to learn of the presence of one kind of human being (one countenance). This perhaps makes it sound like the poet has an easy task: just be a person, with language! Just arrange some language so that when someone reads it, it exposes personhood in a profound way. Well, if you've never tried it, it's actually very difficult. As Dickinson famously wrote: "None may teach it — Any — / 'Tis the Seal Despair."

I immediately feel compelled to apologize for Ms. Dickinson's

sentiment — and this is no doubt due to my having been involved in *how to* sessions for many years. (Keep those evals up!) The real trouble, though, is that the workshops I teach are full of mainly lovely young people making a noble kind of effort, a kind of effort, moreover, that's extremely sensitive to ridicule and praise. The workshop must therefore be compassionate, as it consists of human beings in the presence of one another. Thus, this fundamentally *social* training ground — “Creative Writing” in academia — has become the foundation of American poetry. Our poets come up through it, and as they do so, their socialization aligns them and their poetry with one another, rather than with the society they live in. The latter expectation — to be a great poet and be known by the society you live in — can only be offered as a joke. Take Lucille Clifton, for instance. Almost every American I meet (99.6%, say) outside of the poetry world is completely unaware of her poems. A great many *within* poetry world are unaware. If America cared about poetry, Lucille Clifton would be a household name. America would be ennobled to be in the presence of — and familiar with — those poems. But it isn't. It sure isn't. Even so, tonight there will be another celebration and lauding of so-and-so at 7:30 p. m. in Thompson Hall room 235 (cookies and soft drinks provided), *and America does not give even one fuck.*

America gives a fuck about other things. Its military heroes, for instance, heroing all over the globe in “our” various ongoing wars — some with enemies we're allowed to know about *and* some that are classified information. This is for our own safety, I'm sure, and our old friend national security. America gives a fuck about military technology, too, considering the money “we” pour into it. It is a wonderful and blessed thing, “our” ever more high-tech drone and airstrikes, the forever increasing surveillance, and the weaponry that is more devastating every year (and again, largely classified). America was on my mind because I was reading poems from all over America and because I happened to be reading the Aeschylus play, *Seven against Thebes*, which is about war. In the play, Thebes is a city besieged — a city under attack at all seven of its gates. The Chorus in the play is a Chorus of Theban women, who are trapped within Thebes's walls, surrounded by a hostile foreign army intent on taking it (and them). *They express their fear.* Eteokles, large-and-in-charge, with THEBES ball-cap on, tells them to shut up their crying and pray, as women are supposed to do. The women reply:

I will try to do my part,
to shape my prayer as these formulas require,
but the pulse of fear will not be lullabyed;
and in the neighboring regions of my heart
anxieties ignite, terrors catch fire,
and agitations, fanned by the blown sound
of the circling hosts outside,
smolder and burn. I quake,
like the mild paralyzed dove who, from her perch,
huddled with unfledged nestlings all around,
eyes the thick snake.

The women are being terrorized, I dare say — they are “paralyzed” by “a pulse of fear.” *Terror* is a pretty old experience, it seems. A city, massively assaulted, its terrified women waiting inside to see what their fate will be. It is important to understand that there is nothing they can *do*. They will not decide their own fate; their fate, much like our own, will be decided by a war they are not a part of. To combat the “thick snake,” what does the mild dove have? “Eyes.” This use of eyes as a verb reminds me of the Celan term, “Äugigem,” which is often translated as “eyenesses.” In the Nazi camps, prisoners were reduced to being nothing more than eyes, nothing more than a capacity to see what was being done to them. Eyes, like ears, are sites of passive attention. Why does the dove eye the thick snake, when such eyeing does nothing to help her? Why continue to do it? What is the alternative — *not* looking at where one is? Abandoning reality? No, the dove is in a situation she cannot change and there is no alternative but to continue eyeing, in terror, the oncoming threat. To experience such terror — to continue to put your eyes on what is coming for you — is, by all accounts, maddening. You can feel this madness rising up into the play when the women begin to imagine the oncoming disaster . . . and then to crave it, if only to end its terrifying approach:

And by the rule of strife,
the pale, unfamiliar girl become the whore
and trophy of her captor, forced to spread
for the sweating soldier, triumphant, hate-inflamed.
Perhaps a dark deliverance may occur
in that foul bridal, the untamed
violence of that battle-grounded bed.

And there may come to her
a species of relief,
an end of tidal groans, weeping, and grief.

Disaster, that “foul bridal,” might be a “dark deliverance,” and “a species of relief.” This says something about the depth of their terror. The women seem to be reaching the end their capacity to dwell on what they face. And what is the result, finally, of all their speech? Does it change their predicament even one iota? No it does not. Does it teach us what to *do*, should we find ourselves in this predicament? It does not. Does their speech, their insight into war, change the awareness of Eteokles or anyone else in Thebes? Not really, no. The women’s speech is of no *use* at all. It does not help the military effort and it does not change the horrific reality the women may be facing. So why do they continue to speak? Unlike us Americans, the Chorus of Theban women in *Seven against Thebes* are *actually* in a perilous situation, *deserving* of anxiety their city is being strangled. They themselves are quite powerless, and there’s no way out. They know the situation can only be resolved by the will of the gods, i.e., chance. When there is nothing you can *do* to impact on a situation’s resolution, you may still *speak* of that situation and of those who are trying to resolve it. Indeed, you might be *driven* to speak of it, precisely because there’s nothing else you can do. This seems to be the position the Theban women are in. Speaking truthfully of their current situation, though it is of no “use,” is still a power they possess.

What Eteokles’ bitter dialogue with the Theban women draws attention to is the State’s need to muzzle its populace during a war. The danger, Eteokles suggests, is that the speech of the Theban women might cause panic to spread, undermining the morale of the war effort. This is condescending and bogus reasoning, however, when applied to the speech of the Theban women. Their subject matter is disaster, true, but this is not their own choice — it has been forced on them by an enemy’s assault and by the real oblivion it loudly, closely, and on every side threatens. Thebes seems “a city doomed to armored rape,” “a death trap, fatally self-ensnared.” The women are not *imagining things*, nor are they inciting the disaster. The women are simply describing how the threat of disaster *feels* for a human being who is trapped in its process. Their speech *dwells with* the disaster, withstanding what it is, lighting what its potentials are. *This*, of course, is what truly irritates Eteokles, this bringing of

light — and human presence — to the space of action, war. But the speech of the women, however useless it may be in relation to the prosecution of the war, is not panicked; they are experienced, aware, and thoughtful. It is Eteokles who evidences panic. He calls the women “animals, repulsive beasts,” and accuses them of “sacking the city from the inside,” and of “enslaving” the city. He has become hysterical, I think, because the women have had *the audacity* to bring forth useless speech (making themselves useless speakers) in a time of crisis. “Whatever is to come, your noise can’t stop it,” he tells the women. In his view, only action should be allowed to exist in a time of crisis. *Useful* speech is of course welcome — it is a species of action — but useless speech? Useless speech is “the original crime: art, rime,” to quote from Berryman’s “Dream Song 26”. And *the silencing of useless speech* is the cause to which Eteokles is most devoted. Useless speech is a danger to him because useless speech is capable of telling the truth. In his case, it’s *the truth about war*, in particular, that he doesn’t want to hear, which is understandable, considering he has already *committed* himself to fighting a war in which he is fated to kill *and* be killed by his own brother.

But if the speech of the women, which lights the truth of war for the reader/audience, is not useful to anyone in Thebes, as Eteokles suggests and as the women themselves surely understand, then again I ask: how is it preferable to their silence? The women claim, in the first place, that their speech is *unintentional*. They are *driven* to speak by their words’ true author: “the pulse of fear” within. It’s “the pulse of fear” that drives the women into a *need* to search out the reality that is closing in on them. The women are alive — a racing pulse, *life*, has them in its grasp. When their reality is terrifying, they have the State lullabies to turn to, *Hail Mary Mother of God*, but these women will not say their prayers. They refuse to be lullabyed; the war is too close, and the fear too great to pay attention to anything other than what is unfolding before them. Celan suggests that poetic attention can be like this, akin to the fear-driven attention of the hare. The hare can only continue to *exist* so long as it is attentive. The attention of the Theban women is indeed hare-like, riveted by fear to the present. *Attention* is understandable. But why allow useless speech to develop from that frightened attention?

Seven against Thebes is the acting out of proximity to war, which is proximity to disaster (rape, slavery, torture, death). The speech of the women is an artful (voiced) representation of a terrifying (and voiceless) experience, the experience of real women in proximity

to real wars. which have carried on from the time of Aeschylus to today (for instance, “we” prosecute wars today in places like Kenya, Somalia, Jordan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, Syria, Pakistan, etc. . .). By allowing the pulse of fear — the pulse of fear *in women*, no less — to pursue useless speech concerning the horrors of war *in the midst of a war* . . . Aeschylus makes quite a statement, I think. He was about 56 or so when he put on this play, and he knew war, having fought, in his thirties, in the Battle of Marathon, an important Greek victory, where his *brother* died a hero. He went back to war again in his forties. By the time he was writing *Seven against Thebes*, Greece had been plagued by war for decades, and would soon be off to war again within a year or so. Aeschylus, then, was a soldier, a decorated veteran, dreaming up the useless speech of helpless women trapped in a warzone. We learn of the specific incidents of the war, the spurs to the plot, from various men, because it’s obviously men who have been at the battles. The men do not imagine nearly so much as they report. They speak with useful speech — argument, command, ordering of events, and so on — the speech of action, history. The plot, seen as the sequence of incidents the men report, would be almost completely hollow, however, without the anxious vocal presence of the terrified women. Their anxiety, i.e., their *presence*, brings the plot to life by putting something — primarily themselves! — at stake. Indeed, it’s the speech of the women that brings us closest to *all* that is really at stake in war: the *unknown* number of actually raped and murdered and enslaved women, actually slaughtered men and animals, actually torched houses . . . concealed beneath the useful and “informative” sentences of the historian. History cannot accommodate reality; history dramatically simplifies reality by way of excluding almost everything, and by way of exaggeration.

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Celan suggested that a poem is something like a message in a bottle. The unspoken part of this metaphor is the *need* to send a message in a bottle. What could cause it? Isolation? Imprisonment? Loneliness? Whimsy? Existing? The message in a bottle, if it is an attempt to communicate with the stranger who is fated to find it, is absurd . . . The message writer doesn’t know anything at all about who will find it (or where, or when), so the “message” can’t really be *to* its finder. The message in actuality is wholly self-concerned and self-explanatory. The message writer writes the message to herself,

and more importantly, *of herself*, the location of her stranded presence. To plug the bottle is to call it a poem and drop it into the sea. But here is where it gets strange; Celan says that the poem's author "goes with it," goes toward an other (a stranger, a reader) she cannot foresee. The author of the poem, therefore, is not its sender; the author of the poem is the speaker of the speech *in the bottle*, the mortal soul conjured by the unfolding of that particular act of language (the words on the page), which she has allowed to stand for her own presence. Celan says *the poem, not the poet*, speaks, and "it speaks only on its own, its very own behalf." He points out, moreover: "Reality is not simply there, it must be searched and won." A poem is a searching-and-winning of the presence of a human being in reality, a mortal soul who — and this is really the most important point of all — *is not there to begin with*, but must be conjured by a language act. The poet, for Celan, is more like a midwife, delivering soul (author) after soul (author), each of which is dropped into the sea and "en route." With what hopes? "With the — surely not always strong — hope," he says, "that it may somehow wash up somewhere, perhaps a shoreline of the heart." The hope is that the poem, a birthed soul, will move: "Toward something open, inhabitable, an approachable you, perhaps, an approachable reality. Such realities are, I think, at stake in a poem." By "such realities," I think he means *you and I*.

It is important to understand that *useless* speech is not necessarily *valueless*. Indeed, the *value* of a poem is rooted in the power of the disruption at its source. The occasion generative of poetic speech causes a faltering of the autonomy of the will, generating a new sort of attention that makes language invulnerable to *use*. This is the arising of the midwife presence of the poet (Celan calls this midwife presence "a human being"), the presence that listens for who is there. *The truth has us — we do not have the truth*. With useless speech it's possible to *allow* the truth to have us. A late untitled Celan poem:

The trumpet part
deep in the glowing
lacuna
at lamp height
in the time hole:

listen your way in
with your mouth.

Listen your way in . . . to the trumpet part . . . with your mouth. There are two ways in to a trumpet; one is where the sound comes out (for the listener), the other is where breath is put in (by the musician). The speaker's command — "listen your way in" — is directed at both sides simultaneously, i.e., himself and the reader. The command is to act, but this action — listening in — is a curious one. The outcome of *listening in* — i.e., *being silent so as to eavesdrop* — is dependent on *everything but* the performer of the act. It's an act of submission, really, and its unpopularity has mainly to do with that. *Listening* is something we are happy to do, but we don't usually like to listen *in*. The difference is choice. To *choose*, that is, what to listen to is a normal part of the process of our general obliviousness to where we are, our being on the way to somewhere else. When one *chooses* what to listen to, one is listening *out*. To listen *in*, on the other hand, requires a decisive abandonment of the power to choose what one listens *to*. Without the choice of what to listen to, one has only two things to listen to: what is and what was.

To listen *in*, then, is a double eavesdropping, i.e., eavesdropping on the present (the exterior, ongoing, infinite) *and* the past (the amygdala, the hippocampus, the cerebellum, and the prefrontal cortex) at the same time. To listen in to the past in this way — searching for the story of oneself — is not usually something that is possible. It only becomes possible when the poet is faced with the limitations of the autonomy of the will . . . and makes the decision to *abandon* the autonomy of the will. Celan spoke — in his Bremen Address — of "the efforts of younger poets who, unsheltered even by the traditional tent of the sky, exposed in an unsuspected, terrifying way, carry their existence into language, racked by reality and in search of it." This, I think, is precisely what the chorus of Theban women do: they carry their existence into language, racked by reality and in search of it.

American poets, in 2020, speak from the inverse situation; however highly touted "the enemy" may be, they are *not*, in fact, at our walls — they are far far away in the actual "actions" taking place on the many borders of our solitary empire. Our being *embattled* is an illusion that has been carefully developed; the truth is something quite different: we're a very wealthy and safe country, safe from all but ourselves and our illusions. We have besieged

ourselves, you might say, with illusions designed to conceal and/or normalize what we're doing to the rest of the world. The reality the Theban women are racked by is quite obvious — the terror of an invading army literally at the gates. American poets must utter, in 2020, from the inverse position, from deep within the privileged, safe, oblivious, and proudly diseased core of a self-concealing empire — yes, from AMERICA, a great empire's comfortably delusional homeland penitralia. A challenge, to be sure, even if it's not possessed of anything like the (voiced, artful) experience of the Theban women. Being racked by a reality so explicit and dire rivets the women's attention to the unfolding of the present, which means that they know at least where and how to begin to be "in search of it." They know already, that is, what it is they're surrounded by, and what it means for them if the gates are overrun. American poets are not so lucky; their search for what has racked them often hasn't the faintest idea of where and how to begin.

The more I think about the message in a bottle metaphor, the more ingenious it seems to get. The racked presence of Aeschylus, or, if you prefer, the racked presence of the Theban women he was able to conjure, was searched and won, bottled and dropped. This bottle *actually* washed up somehow on a shore of the heart, *my* heart. To open it and read the message is no *help* to me, or to my situation, just as the speech of the women is no help to them (I will not be their rescuer, 2,500 years later). *But I was elated when I found it and opened it.* It was possessed of a very rare thing: the presence of a human being. Celan closes a letter he wrote to Hans Bender: "We live under dark skies and — there are few human beings. Hence, I assume, so few poems. The hopes I have left are small. I try to hold on to what remains." In America, we've got in place a system that artificially generates poets and poems, both of which are rendered largely meaningless by their confinement to academia and the society's complete lack of interest. Perhaps it's true that almost all the poems written today — poems generously subsidized by our University system — go pretty much *immediately* into the oblivion of the sea bottom, meeting with no one and having little to no impact on the society as it moves forward in time. It's a strange and embarrassing situation, but I think there is a golden lining of a sort. To understand this golden lining, one has to imagine walking along the beach somewhere . . . *and actually finding a bottle with a message in it.* It would almost not matter what the message was! Who could pretend to be nonplussed? Who could pretend not to be amazed

and weirdly heartened somehow by the completion of the bottle's journey? *The odds* that a specific poem and a specific reader would ever meet — it's staggering. To find one is *inevitably* to pay "homage to the majesty of the absurd which bespeaks the presence of human beings," to quote Celan one last time. To find one is to have someone to respond to, to dwell with, and to measure yourself by. The idea that *someone was actually there*, someone carried her existence into language and set that language free, dropped it hopefully into the sea, the violent space of the unsubsidized. And *why?* Just to — *conceivably* — have been there. *Just to meet me.*

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