

— 2013 —

It was his poetry that kept him going

Shelley's "Defence of Poetry" (1821) culminates in an assertion of poetry as a source not only of knowledge but of power. Shelley's claims for poetry go beyond the joy to be had in a thing of beauty or a memory-quickenning spot of time. The criteria of excellence may begin with aesthetics but assuredly do not end there. Poetry is "the most unfailing herald, companion, and follower of the awakening of a great people to work a beneficial change in opinion or institution." A poem is, moreover, not only "the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth" but also, and not incidentally, a metonymy of the cooperative imagination altogether. It "is ever found to coexist with whatever other arts contribute to the happiness and perfection of man." The famous pronouncement that closes the essay—"Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world"—does not do justice to the poet's reasoning. The visionary power he ascribes to the poet does not translate into laws, judgments, statutes, and legislative decrees, but something that exists independently of these things just as a Platonic ideal exists beyond empirical verification. For Shelley, poetic genius lies in the apprehension of a new truth before it gains currency. Metaphor is the medium of the change; words precede concepts that prefigure deeds. Not as a lawmaker, then, but as an interpreter of sacred mysteries the poet speaks to us and to the spirit of the age. The penultimate sentence in the "Defence of Poetry"

comes closer to Shelley's intention than the equally grandiloquent final clause: "Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present, the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire; the influence which is moved not, but moves."

Shelley has always held a great appeal for youthful idealists and Romantic rebels. At eighteen he was expelled from Oxford for writing "The Necessity of Atheism." He championed free love and eloped with a child bride. He alienated his father and jeopardized a baronetcy. He foresaw the rise of democratic rule, the overthrow of tyrants, the triumph of liberty, the liberation of the oppressed. All these things were inevitable, he said. In a long poem presenting what he called a "beau idéal" of the French Revolution, his hero and heroine escape from reactionary armies and lead a bloodless "Revolution of the Golden City."¹ Shelley envisaged a new Athens, a "loftier Argo," a "brighter Hellas," a renewal of "the world's great age."² His amatory philosophy can be paraphrased as "love the one you're with." He notoriously denounced monogamy:

I never was attached to that great sect,
Whose doctrine is, that each one should select
Out of the crowd a mistress or a friend,
And all the rest, though fair and wise, commend
To cold oblivion, though it is in the code
Of modern morals, and the beaten road
Which those poor slaves with weary footsteps tread,
Who travel to their home among the dead
By the broad highway of the world, and so
With one chained friend, perhaps a jealous foe,
The dreariest and the longest journey go.³

It is a remarkable statement even for a century whose novelists subjected the institution of marriage to unprecedented scorn.

Just as Shelley's occasional outbursts of self-pity ("I pant, I sink, I tremble, I expire!") can blunt the wondrous force of his enjambed couplets, so the un-

1. In "Laon and Cythna; or, The Revolution of the Golden City," later retitled "The Revolt of Islam," Shelley's longest poem, an epic of twelve cantos in Spenserian stanzas.

2. In a chorus in "Hellas," often printed separately and identified by its first line, "The world's great age begins anew."

3. In "Epipsychidion."

savory facts of his personal life (he abandoned the young bride, who committed suicide) have acted as a check on a young poet's enthusiasm for the author of "Ode to the West Wind," "Ozymandias," and "The Triumph of Life." Among the great English Romantic poets no reputation has taken quite as bad a beating as has Shelley's. "The man Shelley, in very truth, is not entirely sane, and Shelley's poetry is not entirely sane either," Matthew Arnold wrote. Arnold was not unsympathetic. He allowed that Shelley's "charm" was genuine. In a sense Shelley was an angel, Arnold wrote, but "a beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain."

Of the power of poets to legislate or otherwise effect social change we are entitled to have our doubts. In *The Dyer's Hand* (1962), W. H. Auden wrote that Shelley's noble phrase, "the unacknowledged legislators of the world," describes "the secret police, not the poets." On reflection most of us would side with Auden on that one. The idea of poetry as an agent of widespread enlightenment seems a ludicrous claim, possible to make only in the early years of a century less downcast and dispirited than the one that followed it. The poets don't stand a chance against the Ministry of Intelligence and National Security, the Gestapo, the Stasi. The only thing these entities have in common with poets is that they are, in differing ways and for different reasons, "unacknowledged." Closer to home, poetry is tolerated but pales in power, status, and everything else to punditry of even the blandest and most conventional sort. On Capitol Hill or in Foggy Bottom, few policy makers ask themselves how their initiatives will play among the poets.

Richard Blanco, who read a poem at President Obama's second inauguration, was widely described as the youngest inaugural poet, the first who is openly gay, and the first with a strong Hispanic identity. Alexandra Petri of the *Washington Post* used "One Today," the poem Blanco delivered at the ceremony, as the signal to ask rhetorically whether poetry has breathed its last.⁴ Blanco irritated Petri with the poetical phrase "plum blush" applied to dusk. He was, in her view, an example of an American dream gone awry: a man who has overcome genuine obstacles for the dubious sake of mastering an "obsolete" craft. "The kind of poetry they read to you at poetry readings and ladle in your direction at the Inaugural is—well, it's all very nice, and sounds a lot like a Poem, but—it has changed nothing," Petri writes. "No truly radical art form has such a well-established grant process." Petri recirculates the perennial grievances you hear from former English majors and others who fear the worst

4. Petri's post appeared on the *Washington Post's* blog on January 22, 2013, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/compost/wp/2013/01/22/is-poetry-dead/>.

about an art form they once loved. Contemporary poetry is “limp and fangless.” It lacks an audience. It makes nothing happen. It pretends to be “radical” but isn’t. It is “institutionalized” and does not exist outside academic walls. You don’t get the news from poetry. (“You barely get the news from the news,” Petri tartly observes.) In perhaps her most devastating line, Petri proposes an analogy between poets and postal carriers: “a group of people sedulously doing something that we no longer need, under the misapprehension that they are offering us a vital service”—a far cry from the image of the reliable postman making house calls like doctors in the last line of Philip Larkin’s “Aubade.” Poets and their advocates responded to Petri’s post with angry denials that they are “obsolete.” John Deming voiced the feelings of many when he wrote that “a very small percentage receive grants. We are here, and we plate your dinners. We teach your kids. We slave over works we know will receive no wide audience. We shoe your horses. We work in all kinds of offices. We write about all of this and none of it, and some of us do it really, really well. We find ways to make a living and still practice an art form that yields clarity and meaning. How is that not Blanco’s ‘American dream’ in every sense?”⁵

In America we have had stereotypes of the poet as clown prince, beatnik, nervous wreck, nature-loving recluse, world-besotted aesthete. Formerly an eccentric spinster, she may now be a self-actualized role model and possibly even a concerned citizen on PBS or NPR. The poet’s day job is writer in residence at the local university and, for the sake of argument, let us say she is scheduled to give a talk next week on Shelley and “The Mask of Anarchy.” She has chosen the poem because of the question Alexandra Petri thought important enough to ask twice in her piece in the *Washington Post*: “Can it change anything? Can a poem still change anything?” Shelley wrote “The Mask of Anarchy” in a flash of fury after word reached him of the so-called Peterloo Massacre on August 16, 1819, when militiamen and cavalrymen, drunk and out of control, galloped full-blast, with sabers drawn, into a peaceful rally in favor of parliamentary reform. The demonstrators had assembled to protest famine, desperate living conditions, chronic unemployment. The soldiers killed several demonstrators, as many as eighteen by one count, and injured hundreds more, all of them unarmed. The lecturer explains that Peterloo, a defining moment in English history, got its name from St. Peter’s Field, near Manchester, where the bloody incident took place—and because “loo” as a suffix jeered at Tory pride in Britain’s military triumph over Napoleon at Waterloo. Shelley, indignant, issued a

5. John Deming’s “open letter” appeared in *Coldfront* on Tuesday, January 22, 2013, <http://coldfrontmag.com/news/open-letter-to-alexandra-petri>.

call to action, but a call of a curious kind. In “The Mask of Anarchy,” he summons the “Men of England, heirs of Glory, / Heroes of unwritten story” to “Rise like lions after slumber / In unvanquishable number— / Shake your chains to earth like dew / Which in sleep had fallen on you— / Ye are many—they are few.” And how are the “heirs of Glory” to shake off their chains? With nonviolent resistance. In the face of charging bayonets and scimitars, Shelley exhorts the “many” to keep their places and not fight back when attacked: “Stand ye calm and resolute, / Like a forest close and mute, / With folded arms and looks which are / Weapons of unvanquished war.” A full century before Gandhi implemented the strategy of achieving your aims by shaming your foes, Shelley got there first. “On those who first should violate / Such sacred heralds in their state / Rest the blood that must ensue, / And it will not rest on you.” Thoreau admired the poem; Gandhi quoted it often in his campaign to free India.

“The Mask of Anarchy” became a major document in the history of civil disobedience. It was a radical poem in August of 1819, that magical year of Keats’s odes and Shelley’s “Prometheus Unbound,” and poetry retains its radical potential today in spite of the constancy of worry about its waning influence. Poetry, literature, art, even the crude art of newspaper cartoons and amateur videos cause dictators to take notice. In places where the freedoms of speech and press are tested continually, the poet, merely by speaking his or her mind, risks nasty consequences. To the honor roll of courageous authors who have suffered at the hands of governments—been exiled, censored, incarcerated, even sentenced to death—we have recently had to add the Qatari poet Muhammad ibn al-Dheeb al-Ajami, who got a life sentence for having written—and been videotaped reciting—a poem entitled “Tunisian Jasmine.” The poem lauds the uprising in Tunisia that sparked the Arab Spring rebellions: “We are all Tunisia in the face of a repressive [elite],” Ajami wrote. In November 2012, the Associated Press reported on the case. “Officials” charged that the poem “insulted Qatar’s emir and encouraged the overthrow of the nation’s ruling system.” The *Guardian* ran a fuller account. Ajami had been jailed a year earlier, in November 2011, when the video of “Tunisian Jasmine” surfaced on the Internet. He had been kept in solitary confinement since his arrest. A third-year student of literature at Cairo University, he was convicted of insulting the Gulf nation’s ruler, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani. The more serious charge of “inciting to overthrow the ruling system” could have led to the death penalty. The poet Andrei Codrescu—who has a poem in this edition of *The Best American Poetry*—commented on NPR with his customary bite. “The emir of Qatar is a tolerant man. He allowed *Al Jazeera*, which is based in his country, to broadcast reports of the Arab Spring as long as they didn’t cover

local unrest.” But with brazen hypocrisy the emir “drew the line” at Ajami’s criticism of the Qatari regime and other governments in the region. “Freedom is relative,” Codrescu said. “In the United States, it’s hard to write a poem offensive enough to get you even a few days in jail. In Vladimir Putin’s Russia, the young performers of the band Pussy Riot were sentenced to two years in prison for insulting him in church. That’s not bad for Russia, where in Stalin’s time, a poem insulting the leader would get you executed in a jiffy.” By the same logic, “if Mohammed Ajami had insulted the emir in a mosque, he might have been decapitated instead of just getting a life sentence. A ruler must draw the line somewhere.”⁶

In the United States, as Codrescu noted, it is hard for a poem to get noticed, even if it does its best to give offense—but, of course, that may be an underrated virtue rather than a lamentable fact. The case of Ajami’s “Tunisian Jasmine” is one extreme example of the power of poetry to disturb a tyrant’s sleep. Where the freedom to speak your mind is not a novelty, the poet may have an agenda other than a political one but no less dangerous. We have galloped from analog to digital models of the universe. Some poets will continue to find inventive ways to adapt to the new paradigm; others may feel that their writing constitutes an act of nonviolent resistance—a vote for Gutenberg, the book, the old seemingly obsolete technologies of communication. V. S. Pritchett, in the introduction to an anthology of stories, wrote in 1980, “In a mass society we have the sense of being anonymous: therefore we look for the silent moment in which singularity breaks through, when emotions change, without warning, and reveal themselves.” That such a breakthrough is more likely to happen in a freely written poem rather than one that has been commissioned and vetted by committee for a ceremonial purpose should not come as a surprise.

Denise Duhamel, who chose the poems for *The Best American Poetry 2013*, has appeared in the series seven times since Louise Glück and A. R. Ammons picked poems of hers in back-to-back volumes in 1993 and 1994. It would have been eight times if the editor hadn’t declined to include herself: her “Ode to the Other Woman’s Ass” in *Ecotone* (and reprinted on *The Best American Poetry* blog) has the traits—humor, warmth, passion, intelligence, and genuineness—that make her poems irresistible. “Exuberance is beauty,” wrote William Blake. “Energy is eternal delight.” Denise has as much natural

6. “Qatari Poet Sentenced to Life in Prison for Writing,” *npr.org*, December 4, 2012, <http://www.npr.org/2012/12/04/166519644/qatari-poet-sentenced-to-life-in-prison-for-writing>.

exuberance as anyone practicing the art, with a seemingly unlimited amount of renewable energy. I have known and worked with Denise for many years. When a production of her play *How the Sky Fell* ran for four performances in an Off-Off-Broadway theater in 1997, I was in the cast. Over the years she and I have spent more than a few afternoons collaborating on a play, poems, or other projects. I knew we'd have fun working together, and I suspected that she would have a large appetite for the many kinds of poetry being written at the moment. But I was not prepared for her intensity of focus. No sooner did she receive a magazine than its contents were devoured and considered for an ever-growing list of poems that elicited Denise's enthusiasm. It is always difficult making cuts, but Denise's professionalism ruled the day. In the making of one of these books the production schedule requires more than one deadline. Never before in the twenty-six years of this series did I work with an editor who managed to beat every deadline along the way.

Among the poets we lost in 2012 was Adrienne Rich, who edited the 1996 volume in the series—a radical book by any standard. Adrienne included poems by high school students, prisoners in correctional facilities, outsiders of many stripes. She wanted to represent the full range of poetry written in North America while maintaining vigilance against “self-reference and solipsism.” She wanted “poems that didn't simply reproduce familiar versions of ‘difference’ and ‘identity.’” On the contrary, she wrote, “I was looking for poems that could rouse me from fatigue, stir me from grief, poetry that was redemptive in the sense of offering a kind of deliverance or rescue of the imagination, and poetry that awoke delight—lip-to-lip, spark-to-spark, pleasure in recognition, pleasure in strangeness.” Rich's volume ranks among the most controversial in the history of the series. Harold Bloom took such offense that when, in 1998, he edited a retrospective collection celebrating our tenth year, he omitted any poem from *The Best American Poetry 1996* and devoted his entire introduction to an attack on that book in particular and on the literary aesthetics that inform it. Any editor would have been hurt by such an assault. Adrienne took it in stride. “I look at it as a weird tribute,” she said. Adrienne's poem “Endpapers,” which appeared in *Granta* and was chosen for *The Best American Poetry 2013*, concludes with these lines:

The signature to a life requires
the search for a method
rejection of posturing
trust in the witnesses

a vial of invisible ink
a sheet of paper held steady
after the end-stroke
above a deciphering flame

I have a couple of friends who left Saigon on the day the last Americans cleared out in April 1975. One of them clipped the *New York Times* obituary of Nguyen Chi Thien, who died in October 2012 at the age of seventy-three. “He was a very great Vietnamese poet,” my friend said. Thien, a U.S. citizen since 2004, had lived in Santa Ana, California, since coming here. His poems, collected in *Flowers from Hell* (1996), are available in English, French, Spanish, German, Czech, Korean, and Chinese—but not in Vietnamese. “My poetry’s not mere poetry, no, / but it’s the sound of sobbing from a life, / the din of doors in a dark jail, / the wheeze of two poor wasted lungs, / the thud of earth tossed to bury dreams, / the clash of teeth all chattering from cold,” he wrote. The “Solzhenitsyn of Vietnam,” as he came to be known, did not evacuate Saigon in 1975. He stayed and cast a fearless eye on the injustices of the Communist regime. Three times Thien was arrested. He did a long stretch in Hoa La Prison, the infamous “Hanoi Hilton.” Of his six years there he had to spend three in solitary confinement. He had access to no books. Worse, he lacked a writing implement and the paper on which to write. He suffered from tuberculosis and was prone to respiratory illnesses. The conditions for even the healthiest prisoner were inhumane. The hunger was constant, the summer sun unforgiving, the winter cold almost unendurable. There were times when the guards chained Thien naked in his cold cell. Nevertheless he wrote. He marked the days with poems, seven hundred of them in all; he composed them, worked on them entirely in his head, and then committed them to memory so effectively that when the time came he was able to write them out for publication—to the wide acclaim they deserved even apart from the miracle of their composition. Not until 1995 was Thien permitted to leave Vietnam. By then the evidence of his heroism was irrefutable. It was his poetry that kept him going, poetry that sustained and nourished him. In a prison camp in 1976 he wrote, “I have only poetry in my bosom, / And two paper-thin lungs / To fight the enemy, I cannot be a coward. / And to win him over, I must live a thousand autumns!”