



VIRGINIA  
ASSOCIATION OF  
TEACHERS OF  
ENGLISH

2020

### The Sublime Utility of Poetry

Louis Gallo

Radford Univeristy, lgallo4@verizon.net

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.bridgewater.edu/vej>



Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [English Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Language and Literacy Education Commons](#)

#### Recommended Citation

Gallo, Louis (2020) "The Sublime Utility of Poetry," *Virginia English Journal*: Vol. 70 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.bridgewater.edu/vej/vol70/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals and Campus Publications at BC Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Virginia English Journal by an authorized editor of BC Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [rloew@bridgewater.edu](mailto:rloew@bridgewater.edu).

---

## The Sublime Utility of Poetry

### Author Biography

Three volumes of Louis Gallo's poetry, *Archaeology*, *Scherzo Furiant* and *Clearing the Attic*, are now available. Three forthcoming volumes, *Crash*, *Why is there Something Rather than Nothing?* and *Leeway & Advent*, will be published in the near future. His work will appear in *Best Short Fiction 2020* forthcoming. A novella, "The Art Deco Lung," will be published in *Storylandia*. His work has appeared or will shortly appear in *Wide Awake in the Pelican State* (LSU anthology), *Southern Literary Review*, *Fiction Fix*, *Glimmer Train*, *Hollins Critic*, *Rattle*, *Southern Quarterly*, *Litro*, *New Orleans Review*, *Xavier Review*, *Glass: A Journal of Poetry*, *Missouri Review*, *Mississippi Review*, *Texas Review*, *Baltimore Review*, *Pennsylvania Literary Journal*, *The Ledge*, *storySouth*, *Houston Literary Review*, *Tampa Review*, *Raving Dove*, *The Journal (Ohio)*, *Greensboro Review*, and many others. Chapbooks include *The Truth Changes*, *The Abomination of Fascination*, *Status Updates* and *The Ten Most Important Questions*. He is the founding editor of the now defunct journals, *The Baratavia Review* and *Books: A New Orleans Review*. His work has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize several times. He is the recipient of an NEA grant for fiction. He teaches at Radford University in Radford, Virginia.

## THE SUBLIME UTILITY OF POETRY

### I.

Throughout recorded history, and no doubt before, people have written, listened to and read poetry. I once took the phenomenon for granted—it simply *is*. Lately, however, in a world dominated by technology, engineering, digital communication, spread sheets, rubrics, assessment grids and the like, I often wonder if poetry will become a casualty to this avalanche. But, lo! -- the internet itself now hosts an ever-increasing proliferation of poetry magazines and sites (many of them now superior to the print journals of old, which I could not have predicted only a few years ago.) The question is *why*? Why do people need much less write poetry? The need transcends color, creed, gender and politics. Why is poetry “useful,” if we dare apply such a utilitarian term to the art? And by the way, whatever I say about poetry applies equally well to art in general. In the broader sense, why do people need art? Why is aesthetic satisfaction so crucial to well-being? [See my poem, “The Evolution of Hello . . .,” in the Collection that follows as a somewhat facetious take on the origins of language in general]

At some point in my poetry classes, whether creative writing or literature, I stop the class and ask point blank: “Who needs poetry? It doesn’t cure disease, make you rich, fortify the infrastructure, eliminate poverty, and so on. So what good is it? Why are you in this class? An easy “A” (though quite a few think it not so easy)? At first many students seem dumbfounded by the question, as if they had never thought about it before. Then hands start to slowly rise. The most common answer, “It’s therapeutic.” Which signifies to me a definite medical, spiritual and psychological usefulness. Others might say, “It allows me to express myself.” So I ask, why is it important to express yourself? “So I won’t feel alone,” the usual answer, in league with the former “therapeutic” values. Recently, a former student of mine who is publishing a lot of his poetry these days came to class to do a reading (he has graduated but keeps in touch), and his answer to the question was beautifully put: “It helps us get through.” Again, the therapeutic magic.

Obviously, not everyone needs or desires poetry. But quite a few do, and those who so need and desire have been with us for millennia. The current turn in universities toward emphasis on technology, with a resulting diminution of attention to the arts, is therefore

extremely worrisome. What is the point of mere technology and its marvels without the intellectual, spiritual and soulful *pleasure* that it can and does enable? I note that during the winter Olympics in Russia, the first thing the Russian hosts paraded out during the opening ceremonies was a litany of the great Russian artists, composers and poets—these, and not so much technological achievements, were regarded as the highest and most sublime qualities of Russian history. So even the technocrats are *aware* of the need for art and poetry, however shabbily artists and poets may be treated while alive. The case of Stalin's constant humiliation of Shostakovich comes to mind. In the end, however, the composer easily outwitted the brutal dictator by creating music of a majesty and magnitude Stalin could never grasp.

**Enter the Covid-19 pandemic . . .**

*The Corona came down like a wolf on the fold (apologies to Lord Byron)*

At first during the first weeks of quarantine and lockdown I felt that poetry was more irrelevant than ever. Only the medical experts and scientists mattered. Which of course they do—not politics and ideology. But as I converted my classes to online email versions of themselves, I discovered that many students were submitting poems directly addressing their personal experiences with the drastic disruption in their lives as well as their heightened fears and anxieties. I expected some of it but not such overwhelming abundance. Obviously, every poet in the world, professionals and amateurs, would be writing Corona virus poems. The Collective We seemed hungry for it. I wondered what I, a mere humble writer of poetry and fiction, could do to help. I was no first responder, no front-line essential worker—how could someone like myself help even if only in a modest, minor way? The fact that my students were emailing me poems daily about the virus, the fact that we could no longer share their poems in a classroom setting . . . I had an idea. What if I started a Group on Facebook devoted to the poems of my students, a cyberspace where they could still read each other's poems and react to them in as personal manner as possible? Worth a try.

So I launched a group with the ungainly title of Gallo Students Poetry Jam. I invited my current students to post their poems (I taught a class of Beginning Poetry Writing, Advanced Poetry Writing, and an Honors class called Texts and Contexts, the latter a hybrid of the study of poetry in general and beginning poetry writing.) The students seemed overjoyed to post their

poetry. So I figured, why not invite all of my students, those current and those from the past, to join? Soon students from decades ago were posting. So I thought, why not allow the students to invite their interested friends to join? And the friends did join. So I thought, why not invite colleagues as well? So I did. And some joined if only to read the poems, not necessarily to post any. As I write we approach 240 members in good standing. I had hoped for maybe 25, if that. Now I'm figuring, why not invite anybody interested? So, if you are, you will need to go to my Facebook page—Lou Gallo—and search the Group Listings for Gallo Students Poetry Jam.

If nothing else, I hope this idea can serve as a model for what any writing teacher might launch for their own students. Zoom comes to mind as a better option, but at the moment, Zoom is something I have not mastered, though I plan to learn it this summer. I firmly believe that we will wind up back in cyberspace rather than in the classroom for the next semester or two. This virus will continue to spread for a while. It shows no signs of relenting, especially now with the relaxing of social distancing measures

What mostly impressed me was the gratitude my students expressed for the opportunity to unveil themselves in group fashion. The experience proved cathartic for them and me as well. I even saw that some students were suddenly writing better poems! And some students from the mostly lower level Honors course, none English majors, none having ever written a poem in their lives, were suddenly writing beautiful, intelligent poetry and either posting it themselves or allowing me to post it for them, with their permission. The Group is probably about a month or so old now, and perhaps it will wither away or perhaps expand and flourish. Much will probably depend upon the condition of the planet in coming months. Whatever happens, it has served and is serving both an aesthetic and psychological need, a hunger for the sublime rather than brooding over the wretched, despairing condition we now find it almost impossible to escape.

All of us, together while apart, every person on the planet. Who could have predicted?  
*The Corona came down like a wolf on the fold.*

And, as I like to joke, “A poem a day/Keeps Dr. Phil away.” May the poetry be with you!

## II.

### METAPHOR

Fuse, say, the planet Jupiter  
the red spot of which you behold

through your Edmund Scientific  
telescope with a saltine cracker,

though I prefer sodium free,  
even if they have nothing

in common save your own  
brash, mad, tectonic wizardry

and you have presided over  
a perhaps absurd yet original

marriage,

though, it seems, that  
since crackers and Jupiter

share identical atoms

and a great deal of chemical  
constituencies

and were both smashed together  
in the primal, Ur-seed

of the nascent universe,  
the wedding took place eons ago,

before anyone could begin  
to imagine that someone like you

would come along with your  
paltry legerdemain

and insist they renew their vows.

### THE WONDERFUL WORD BECAUSE

Automatic cause and effect, instant, end  
of conversation, and sometimes it suffices  
by itself—WHY? BECAUSE! . . .nothing  
further needed or desired because who  
wants intricate reasoning, a thing of the past  
when you had time to lie back on an ottoman,  
puff your opium, contemplate the vicissitudes  
and free trade and the glory of empire,  
all tokens of an age long defunct, a time  
of parlor lamps with fringed shades,  
wallpaper of bouquets, damsels in red  
with woeful eyes . . .

now listen to the fighter bombers grind  
through the sky, right above your house,  
on the way to combat evil everywhere,  
now, when the plutocracy has rendered us  
impoverished and we chant Yo Ho Heave Ho  
all the daylight through and dream of iguanas  
that breathe fire and teeth inching down  
from the ceiling and contagious epidemics,  
oh, it's a phase shift all right, a tectonic upheaval,  
the world now, this rugged green planet  
churning through space though clogged  
with debris and plastic and carbon footprints

and microbes—and it's probably too late  
to make amends, to rectify, to accommodate . . .  
because the obvious has never been more obvious  
and we want nothing more glorious than  
to distinguish ourselves as we waltz out  
of history along with our visions and dreams  
and art and music, soon relics for the roaches.  
Why have we so mauled ourselves?  
Because.

## HOW TO WRITE YOUR POEM

Slather olive oil into the cast iron pan  
(that may or may not be your mind)  
and crack the shell against its edge.  
Pour the entrails carefully--  
this time you want sunny-side-up  
not a scrambled chaos. Ignite the flame.  
Keep your eye on the yolk. Don't let it  
dehydrate into a flat, chalky wedge.  
When firm and round (the symbol of perfection)  
slide it onto your spatula then a plate,  
let's hope fine china.  
Dip your bread into the center  
and savor such juice.  
Don't fret over what it might have been  
or become had you not intervened.



This is why consciousness  
entered the universe.  
This is why you had no choice.  
This is why you regret everything.

## CLICHES

we hate them because  
they're usually true  
we love them because  
they replace thinking—  
look, there goes one  
on wing like that bird  
of a feather . . .  
and they come and go:  
whoever says now  
“dead as a doornail”  
(what the hell is a  
doornail anyway?)

sometimes they're  
single words  
like “awesome” or “dude”—  
if everything is awesome,  
nothing is awesome  
(what a wanton destruction  
of a beautiful word—  
I hope it never happens  
to “sublime”)

sometimes they come  
in phrases, like families  
in a station wagon  
on the way to the lagoon:  
“I’m up to my neck”

but worse, using the noun  
as an adjective:  
you’re so cliché  
(should be clichéd)  
that I bet you earned  
that penny saved

### BOOK SALE

I’m always first in line for the library book sale,  
even now, after all these years, when the need  
for a rush over some rare edition,  
exquisite vellum or intricate leather,  
has thinned like vapor from a nozzle.  
Love is a kind of habit, like eating,  
and after a while you just feed,  
forgetting the magnificent entree  
or even appetizer that once convinced you  
it was worth the wait, the time, your life,  
          though you suspect no such tidbit ever existed,  
          that you’d have to cook or write it yourself

if only you had the talent, vision, wisdom  
and taste.

But today I slouch  
in the parking lot behind the steering wheel  
and while gazing at passing cars I spot,  
across the street, a heavy yellow machine,  
ravenous as ancient reptiles, rips, tears  
and bludgeons an old building to pieces.  
Beyond this annihilation, I can't see much.  
We're enveloped by haze this morning.  
It is comforting to know there are people  
operating machines, who know which levers  
to pull at precisely the right moments  
so that even demolition proceeds  
with a kind of finesse.

THE EVOLUTION OF HELLO,  
THE DEVOLUTION OF GRASP:  
A LECTURE

Our hirsute ancestors grasped before  
they spoke.  
Speech, do re me, our glass-shattering falsetto,  
mere epiphenomena,  
something new and hip  
like green stamps with the broccoli.

By "grasp" do not presume eureka  
which seems most natural to presume  
but wrong:

we mean ejaculation in all innocence—  
clutching with the digits  
or as it were  
fine sensory-motor coordination.

clasping, pointing, clapping,  
slugging, swinging, rubbing  
palms against the cool wall  
of a cave or lover's abdomen

Item: the neo-cortical folds evolve  
from hairy-handedness  
as it veers into self-control.

And thus we say hello!

Which leads experts to believe  
it's hand, not tongue, saliva, lip,  
throat, ear, tooth or gums  
that strain alphabet from soup.

So rather than foot in mouth,  
we find our forebears plunging fists  
into their brains (up to the wrists!)  
to pluck immaculate conceits  
from the muck

Hail digital thumb  
and dream  
the Ur-complicity

The pencil is on the table, Mable.  
Jean et Phillipe *etudiant*.  
Dulce et decorum est. Mori. Adios.  
All men are Socrates. Socrates is a man . . . or

hey, honey, how's your sign?

(References: Orr and Cappannari, "The Origin of Language"; Weston La Barre, *The Human Animal*)

### MOONLIGHT MADNESS

They've knocked  
fifty percent  
off Emerson's eyeball.  
And get this—  
no batteries!

### NOT WORTH READING

Not worth reading,  
these dreary poems  
on hangnails or buttons  
as if to make specks incandesce  
by yearning . . .  
but then, you're getting old.  
In that mad diaspora of youth  
you too pursued stitches, a bruised heel.  
Words age too,  
creak like covered wagons

sifting through Nebraska.  
No longer the naked beauties  
that kept you permanently drunk.  
So when the sky cracks open  
with light you've forgotten,  
you feel the old tug, the glamor.  
You see her too,  
the one you told goodbye,  
and more than her--  
so many swaying  
on a gentle, swelling horizon.  
There is no return  
but you rush with open arms,  
fingers pinching wildly  
at any floozied vowel  
that will sell itself  
for a song.

#### OCCASIONED BY A VISIT TO HOLLINS

I, also pilgrim, stood on the bank of Tinker Creek  
While awaiting my daughters to make their rounds  
About campus. We had seen two white cranes  
Soar overhead, later two turtle doves in the gravel,  
And Maddie spotted a bluebird perched on a willow branch.

Good omens, we rejoiced, prophetic pioneering.  
The rational mind knows only boundaries, chance.  
It forgets what lingers in the sky, the roses, the trees,  
The water and blue-black soil, what royal auguries  
Slip in through vision, hunch and dream, what  
Animals know and those crazed out of education—  
everything is connected, intertwined, from worm  
To hawk, rainbow to stream, shamanic fusion.  
There is no chance despite what logicians say  
Nor time despite the imminence of Doomsday.  
Nor did our cat Sweetie die the next day  
Though a sudden knock at the door brought a lily  
In a laced glass vase from the veterinarian staff.  
I'm kissing the joys as they fly today  
As I should have done throughout history  
From Ur to Nineveh to Jericho  
But could not because locked in the prison-house  
Of chronology. Neither angel nor beast,  
I've broken free! For this moment at least.

#### A SNAPSHOT OF PABLO NERUDA

I stare at the photo of Pablo Neruda  
on the dust jacket of a book  
of his collected poems.  
The name, of course, Pablo Neruda  
is what makes me stare,  
searching for secrets.  
Without the name it could well

be that photo of my great uncle  
Achille who played a very bad cello.  
Or perhaps anyone's crusty uncle,  
the one who never comes  
to your parties, the one who  
kicked his wife into the street.  
Replace it with the photo of someone else  
and I'd still stare. Pablo Neruda  
could look like anyone  
in Houston or Madrid  
or Olympus.

#### EATING POETRY

The poem faded as I read it,  
the words evaporating in tiny  
bubbles, froth, the way water  
vaporizes on a hot stove.  
I wanted to preserve what I could  
so I wrapped what was left  
of the poem in waxed paper  
so it would not leak or stick  
to anything. I slid it onto  
a shelf of the refrigerator  
and set about my business.

When I returned, late, late  
that evening, I was so hungry  
I sought out leftovers,



found the poem, unwrapped it,  
slapped on some yellow mustard,  
paprika and curcumin power  
and ate it. Best poem  
I ever ate. But bitter, sour.  
Next time I'll try cardamom,  
sweet cream and nutmeg.

Fresh off the page is best of course  
but digestion takes time.

#### READING LIST

I have never read the *Decameron*  
but I plan to.  
I know all about it  
but it has slipped through the cracks.  
I have fifteen different versions,  
some leather bound, many illustrated  
with woodcuts or steel engravings  
by the likes of Dore & co.  
My reading list extends to three  
hundred and fifty years—  
and of course I'll have to add more time  
for books not yet published,  
so make that five hundred years.  
I've never read *War and Peace* either.  
I've tried but don't like all that family  
saga imbroglio—except for the way

Marquez and Dostoevsky do it.  
I much prefer the latter to Tolstoy  
though everyone calls *War and Peace*  
the greatest novel ever written.  
I've never relied on critics;  
I make my own decisions  
when it comes to compiling a list.  
But how will I ever read  
the collected works of Lope de Vega?  
Add another three hundred years.

#### THE WORD "NEVERTHELESSS"

How it re-directs backwards  
to what once was before  
the coup d'etat  
that changed what once was.  
The bloated general huffing  
as he polishes his medals.