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HN-300-F

4/27/2022

The Catalepsy of Poetry in America

Introduction:

The concept of ‘poetry’ as literature appears to be one synonymous with the idea of the past in American society, though that stands in contrast to the abundance of poetic works which are produced today. There is no doubt that poetry is an artform that, at the very least, *exists* in the American society of the twenty-first century, present in education, scholarship, and publication. This meek and quiet state of contemporary poetry, barely disturbing the pool into which it is being poured, becomes evident however when held to the cultural shadows cast by the mountains of English writing’s landscape. Most Americans who aren’t specifically in the fields of education and literary study can say who Robert Frost was, and what English-speaker hasn’t heard of Shakespeare? The presence such writers had within the English-speaking cultures of their respective times through their written work is indisputable, and it is because of this written work – poetic work – that their names have and continue to endure in public consciousness. Were one to ask however who Amanda Gorman or Rupi Kaur are, what writing can be attached to their names, it would become apparent how a very limited number of people are capable of giving an accurate answer concerning these modern English-language poets; fewer people than those who

would know modern actors, singers, influencers, directors, and those otherwise who perpetuate media outside that confined to the what is exclusively considered 'poetry'.

The same form of artistic media which had granted some of the largest names in literature nigh-immortality does nothing now to bestow fame upon a contemporary poet, does not ripple in the consciousness of the age of information. Poetry, while still written and published, is void of any of the same spread and impact which are attributed to the names of the dead – this present decline traceable over the course of the twentieth-century. What power then does such literature have when its past is in possession of more prevalence and adoration in the present day than its contemporary? What future? It is clearly simply by this condition, by the popularity of poetry as compared to other forms of consumable information, that the artform has declined from a former position of social prominence which it held at the beginning of the twentieth century. Yet, I would argue still that the internet and digital media consumption is allowing for a resurgence of engagement and publication, and that adaptation of what is to a changing world need not be considered 'death'.

Synopsis and Outline:

For the purposes of coherently organizing this paper, this argument shall be chronologically separated into two overall discussions: the first measuring the apparent decline of public interest and consumption of poetic works, based in statistics and trends of the yester century (as detailed in the cited text authored by Spaulding) alongside applicable research concerning relevant cultural shifts concerning both changes within the field of poetic writing and wider American society concerning the consumption of information and where its interests laid (likewise referenced in the cited texts by Clausen and Jarrell). This shall be followed by discussion in which the change of

poetry's form was not a 'decline' whatsoever (Clausen and Hall) and of the applications digital media has had in perpetuating the artform in the modern day (Gioia and Stein).

The disciplines focused upon for the presentation of these arguments will emphasize firstly the several aforementioned bodies of research themselves concerning with changes within American culture from a historical perspective; supplemented by analysis of the influential works of poets of the past and present in providing a literary perspective in which developments of the poet form are held in example in explanation for both a decline in appeal to the wider American society (i.e., the audience which would be in consumption of the works) and the means by which a digital presence has been found to aid the health of the genre.

Decline:

Spaulding: "Poetry and the Media: The Decline of Popular Poetry"

How is it that Robert Frost, who died approximately sixty years ago, is still more well-known than Amanda Gorman, a young poet who read her work for the inauguration of President Joseph Biden and during the Superbowl? Established writers are of course more regarded than newcomers – in any scene. But it likewise a factor that poets and poetry are simply less discussed, less prominent in the outlets by which information is spread and presented to consumers, the gradual decay of poetry as presented in information media having been evident across the previous century.

Poet John Spaulding presents in his article, "Poetry and the Media: The Decline of Popular Poetry", published at the turn of the century, a dismal estimation of the potential for poetry to have a place in the American culture of the twenty-first century based on the trends of the genre's discussion within various media platforms. Simple and cruel statistics alone are enough to indicate

a declining wide-spread interest in terms of the dwindling publication concerning the artform – denoting the dwindling amount of poetry found to occupy an increasingly shrinking percentage of pages within the volumes of the popular magazines and newspapers at various points throughout the twentieth-century. Poetry was of course written, was of course published, but Spaulding writes in focus upon the popularly consumed distributors of information – what the widest, largest body of the American public was found to read, and thus conceding that this majority was starved of any exposure to poetry itself, as niche and independent distributors remained on the fringes of the spread of information.

I will avoid bloating my writing with the full sum of the numbers he recites: ultimately Spaulding concludes that poetry is generally without presence and prevalence in the American culture at the time of publication as a result of these measured trends, conceding that “Newspapers do not typically publish poetry, nor do mass circulation magazines, and today there are no network radio shows for poetry, no network television shows. The mass media have largely abandoned poetry...We have popular music, popular dance, popular art, and popular fiction, but we do not have popular poetry,...” (151). One was not, and remains not, exposed to poetry the same way one might stumble upon news of a celebrity or a popular song without explicitly looking for it, or any information in general as prevalently spread across modern outlets; and thus, it is the nature of media itself which Spaulding ascribes the brunt of the blame of this decline to, the absence of poetry now inhibiting any revival in that it is not accessible for an audience, not permeating the life of the culture as popular media is repeatedly demonstrated to.

A push into the popular medium of media is therefore the catalyst should poetry return to the public’s attention and consumption, the author stating, “The media do not simply reflect the direction and taste of popular culture, they create it...And just as they made a decision to abandon

poetry, they could make a decision to embrace it again. There may or may not be a popular audience for poetry now, but there certainly cannot be one if the public is not exposed to it (152). One who has no interest in poetry or literature will for the most part never see it, never explicitly seeking it out. What value has a book if no one reads it, and what influence does that have upon a people? – the lack of interaction is *definitive* of a lack of any plausible influence. A stagnant thing may as well be dead when change is indicative of a continued dialogue, continued interaction, with the world.

Clausen: *The Place of Poetry: Two Centuries of an Art in Crisis: "Rhyme or Reason"*

Poet Christopher Clausen begins his collection of essays, loosely organized around the central theme of tracing the past trends of poetry as an art considered in decline, succinctly defining the response of poets – and thus, of poetry – to its apparent shrink from the the cultural spotlight it once reigned in freely: “Since the end of the eighteenth century, poetry in England (and subsequently in America) has been an art in continual crisis. As its cultural status declined, as its place as a bearer of truth was more and more taken by the sciences, its practitioners made an endless series of revolutions in poetic doctrine while seeking unsuccessfully to make society once again listen to them” (Clausen, 1).

More specifically, the trend of western society to appraise the values of scientific, logical pursuits which emerged following the comparatively nonsensical period of chaos which was the Reformation in the seventeenth-century seemed to place itself at odds with the then-dominance literary art seemed to have possessed over discourse of the human condition. Though it was acknowledged that “...the refusal to separate the denotative from the connotative elements of language gives poetry great advantages in the interpretation of human experience since all experience, when accurately rendered in words, involves both conception and feeling” (Clausen,

7), the emphasis of the human condition upon singular experiences of emotion within the popular tropes of the genre – love poetry existing as far back as the writing of the Epic of Gilgamesh – the development of western society as based in the flourishing spread of ideas based in logical entailed a shift in language and thereby the manner in which information was to be considered: “The language of the modern scientific world, like its knowledge, was to be denotative, univocal, empirical” (Clausen, 9). Once likened to theological treatises, also suffering decline as organized religion saw a general decline in its influence upon both governing bodies and a populace divided now across various Protestant sects, the demesne of human exploration poetry commanded came to be seen as vague and unspecific as a result of the multi-faceted meanings which could be ascribed to its usage of words, and thus rife with a slew of imperfect meanings to formation of a vague, often hidden, point to the author’s work; Clausen noting that “Instead of a virtue, belief without evidence or rigorous logical support came gradually to seem an intellectual vice. When it did so, the very power of poetic artifice was often seen as a threat to the rule of reason, regardless of the particular assertion the poet happened to be making” (Clausen, 8).

As one finds the still-enduring tension that exists between faith and reason in the development of the age of Enlightenment, challenging the previous measures and explanations by which existing authorities asserted their right to rule via a basis in ‘divine rights’, so too does one find the same reminiscence in the modern considerations between art and science. It is this Clausen ascribes as being the main deterrent of poetry’s influence, claiming “The belief that reason and the imagination are in conflict – held as an article of faith by many since [William Blake’s] time and by most adversaries of poetry – has been a disaster for poetry, thought, and our entire civilization” (Clausen, 16). Expanding upon this: “Changes in language are not the whole reason for the decline of poetry...there is something childish about the imagination itself, something which amounts to

disease when adults make use of it or claim for it a positive value in the search for truth...Peasants, children, savages – these were the kind of people who could produce poetry [the scientifically uneducated, the imaginative, those with oral traditions respectively]. That Romantic poetry idealized all three could hardly be an accident if the modern adult world offered such stony oil to the seeds of a poetic revival” (Clausen, 15-16) – Clausen denoting the values which were central to the development of the literature of the Romantic period and American Transcendentalist literature in the nineteenth-century – based in emotion as opposed to the comparatively rigid erudition which overtook social concerns, the response to the flourishing of logic and reason as the foundation for human development where organized faith turned to in-fighting, as something generally at odds with the values and concerns of England and America, both increasingly industrial-focused as societies.

That poetry floundering here, where the day-to-day concerns are far removed from the Romanticized pillars such as Childhood and Divine Revelation is unsurprising. Children suffered and labored in Victorian England, recently industrialized, all the same. The same influences not dissimilar to the creation of Modernism within the twentieth-century, a period of dishevelment with the human condition after decades of near back-to-back conflict and economic difficulties across Europe and most of the world otherwise – language seemingly deteriorating in structure and content, and this whilst relevant to a world seemingly picking through rubble following two world wars, could arguably be seen as disconnected from the public desire to return to the stability of a pre-war era in much the same way the developments of poetic language alienated the form from Enlightenment-era society. In both cases, “At length poetry became a game of words, a form of play that nevertheless at its best was seen to be both serious and important: the most potent expression of truth or falsehood that language was capable of” (Clausen, 6-7); the poetic form

certainly minded, but given granted the concerns which fields such as economics and medicine are held to as ever-relevant in the lives and affects of citizens of a society.

Resurgence:

Hall: *Death to the Death of Poetry: Essays, Reviews, Notes, Interviews: “Death to the Death of Poetry”*

That a decline was noted at all, the trends evident as they were occurring in the twentieth century, and still being discussed in this century in texts must however indicate the inverse – that poetry is *present* in public consciousness and must be for its diminishment to be met with concern whatsoever. Poetry is still published, even if not apparently discussed, and the absence of this discussion becomes a topic of discussion onto itself, enduring and very much alive where thought of (or argued) as dead or dying. This ongoing obituary, still cried aloud and written about today (a point which the writing of this essay is itself evidential of) challenges the premise of poetry’s ‘death’ in that its throes have gone on and been commented upon for most of the twentieth century (in commentary upon the trends Spaulding notes in his previously discussed article), repetitive in their soundings.

As such, there appears to be a paradox in what regard is given to contemporary poetry, something literary critic Donald Hall discusses in his essay, “Death to the Death of Poetry”. Therein does Hall thusly reject that popularized premise, stating as follows: “Everything changes and everything stays the same. Poetry was always in good shape twenty or thirty years ago; now it has always gone to hell. I have heard this lamentation for forty years, not only from distinguished critics and essayists but from professors and journalists who enjoy viewing our culture with alarm” (Hall, 20). Death implies finality after all, and there to be so much bickering noise and for so long

a period of discourse over that roaming date where poetry ceased in its relevance in American culture makes plain that the body is still twitching – and still around to be discussed and grieved. Hall disparages the death in permeation of poetry and its apparent decline, referring to the cyclical passage of what is to become what was as par for the course: “Time,...canonized T.S. Eliot in a 1950 cover story. Certainly Time’s writers and editors altered over thirty years, but they also stayed the same; always the Giants grow old and die, leaving the Pygmies behind. After the age of Eliot, Frost, Stevens, Moore, and Williams, the wee survivors were Lowell, Berryman, Jarrel, and Bishop. When the survivors died, the younger elegiac journalists revealed that the dead Pygmies had been Giants all along – and now the young poets were dwarfs” (Hall, 19).

People write poetry, and no one denies that poets are still a thing which exist. Times change, and so too does the style and manner of reflection upon the human condition change with the world we are needed to comprehend around us. It is for a thing to change that brings it closer to a state of vitality than any decay, for stagnation is itself another form of death, one far closer to the titular ‘death of poetry’ than adaptation, evolution, and proper adjustments to the genre which better connect it the relevant concerns and discussions of the era it finds itself a part of, ensuring continued existence carried into the next day. Poetry is ‘dead’ again in the information era, just over thirty years after Hall had written his essay, and yet contradicting the static of a corpse, has an undeniable presence even if never the center focus.

The most pertinent of these changes which can be so easily disregarded as ‘decline’ can be found in the development of Modernism as a literary genre – the style of poet Walt Whitman (1819 – 1892) arguably influential upon Modernist writing in its dismantling of the previous tropes and trends poetry, and nineteenth-century Romantic poetry in particular, exalted; structure and content

seemingly ‘debased’ as compared to the lofty and rhyming designs poetry is considered archetypical of. One of the more prevalent and well-known authors considered emblematic of this style, Edgar Allen Poe (1809 – 1849), in particular outlined his process for the formation of what he considered a solid piece of poetic work in his essay “The Philosophy of Composition”, published in explanation of his conscious creation of what is perhaps his most famous piece, *The Raven*. The presence of conscious deliberation concerning the most effective impact of the sound of each word in accompaniment of the poem’s contents; structure, rhythm, and repetition of sounds central to the outlining of the piece ahead of publication, is made blatant as Poe details his process:

“...I first established in my mind the climax or concluding query—that query to which “Nevermore” should be in the last place an answer—that query in reply to which this word “Nevermore” should involve the utmost conceivable amount of sorrow and despair. Here then the poem may be said to have had its beginning—at the end where all works of art should begin—for it was here at this point of my preconsiderations that I first put pen to paper in the composition of the stanza:

“Prophet!” said I, “thing of evil! prophet still if bird or devil! / By that Heaven that bends above us—by that God we both adore, / Tell this soul with sorrow laden, if, within the distant Aidenn, / It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore— / Clasp a rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore. / ”Quoth the Raven—“Nevermore.”

I composed this stanza, at this point, first that, by establishing the climax, I might the better vary and graduate, as regards seriousness and importance, the preceding queries of the lover, and secondly, that I might definitely settle the rhythm, the metre, and the length and general arrangement of the stanza, as well as graduate the stanzas which were to precede, so that none of them might surpass this in rhythmical effect. Had I been able in the subsequent composition to construct more vigorous stanzas I should without scruple have purposely enfeebled them so as not to interfere with the climacteric effect”

(Poe, 324).

Poe’s essay was published in 1846, not long after the success of *The Raven* had reached its height. Yet, in 1855 – less than ten years after this influential essay detailing how and why a poem should be written, the first edition of “Leaves of Grass” – a collection of poems by Walt Whitman, was published, the most of prominent of the contained works being *Song of Myself*, its contents incomparable to the consistent sounds and beats of *The Raven* despite both being pieces of writing

of the same genre published around the same relative time, the differences jarring when placed side-by-side:

“Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there wondering, fearing,
Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before;
But the silence was unbroken, and the stillness gave no token,
And the only word there spoken was the whispered word, “Lenore?”
This I whispered, and an echo murmured back the word, “Lenore!”—
Merely this and nothing more”

(Poe, 517).

“I think I could turn and live with animals, they are so placid and self-contain’d,
I stand and look at them long and long.
They do not sweat and whine about their condition,
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,
Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania of owning things,
Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived thousands of years ago,
Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth.
So they show their relations to me and I accept them,
They bring me tokens of myself, they evince them plainly in their possession.
I wonder where they get those tokens,
Did I pass that way huge times ago and negligently drop them?”

(Whitman, 75-76)

Is the divergence of poetry from the Romantic form, a calculated sing-song, into the free-verse Modernistic form Whitman is held as the forebearer of not conceivable as such a ‘decline’ as Hall writes in refutation of? Is it not further expressed by the differing contents, Whitman’s works found often divulging sexual details (“They do not know who puffs and declines with pendant and

bending arch, / They do not know whom they souse with spray.” (Whitman, 47)) whereas works such as Poe’s are found in profound concern of death’s preeminence over human affairs, inescapably? Particularly as the norms and tastes of the prudish and constrained culture of nineteenth century America was concerned, grieving the death of a lost love was inarguably more indicative of the concerns of human life than scenes of implied masturbation Whitman is found to illustrate across several of his works – let alone the allusions to his homosexual orientation which was generally conceived of as ‘sinful’ and ‘ungodly’ by the standards of the time. Furthermore, there is simply less of an education present in the vocabulary Whitman presents, with more traditional works such as Poe’s calling on classical references – such as the bust of Pallas the titular raven of his previously discussed poem is perched upon, a roundabout term for the Hellenistic goddess Athena – this influence or concern with the past befittingly absent from the presented portion of *Song of Myself*, which discards of following in the steps of past authors altogether.

As such, the label of poetry’s devolution is found applicable to simply what is a change in its form, and likewise in this case found explanative of why an audience might be turned away from such works – the confessional and simultaneously sexual content of Whitman’s poems (alongside that of his peers such as Emily Dickenson) capable of making an audience uncomfortable even today. And yet, Whitman is generally held as the more important author within the American literary canon, and found more influential upon the works which would be written throughout the twentieth-century, the abandonment of what were the traditional forms of literature an intrinsic characteristic of emerging Modernism, paralleling Whitman’s disregard for the ‘rules’ which were regarded when penning poems down. Whitman was began as an author who trampled upon the perception of ‘poetry’, and then accepted as one of the exemplars to which literature as a concept is to be held to. Whatever devolution of the literary form Whitman may

seem to be indicative of, his are works still studied and discussed today, and seemingly finding greater sounding, greater hold, than the antiquated works which preceded him, the 'down-to-earth' diction lending itself to greater understanding of at least the contents of Whitman's writing, as opposed to something intimidatingly dense such as Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

Clausen: *The Place of Poetry: Two Centuries of an Art in Crisis: "The Place of Poetry"*

Poet Christopher Clausen traces in his essay, "The Place of Poetry", the course of poetry in its interaction with the public sphere as far back as the nineteenth century, concluding upon poetry's present state. This romanticized 'death' of poetry is discussed as having been attributed to the nature of twentieth-century changes in education, academics, and the sciences in general whilst poetry entered its period of 'high modernism', resulting, as Clausen writes, for "Poetry came more and more to seem, in Gatsby's endlessly illuminating phrase, 'just personal,' inherently an esoteric entertainment...of no public importance. The idea of a public poetry came to seem, in fact, a contradiction in terms. Poet's use of common language at a time when every field of knowledge took increased pride in its own jargon merely confirmed these suspicions of unimportance" (Clausen, 119). In that poetry became increasingly irrelevant in academic discourse, as the nature of poetry had shifted to become affairs of pursuits of the personal rather than sustain any public discourse due to the inherent lack of wealth and fame which accompanied its publication in the modernist period, and thus be incomparable to the new successes of fields such as social sciences; such was inherently outstepped in its ability to explain the human condition, most especially when the nature of such writings at the time were confined to confessional poetry, or the first-person. Archetypical of this period of literature is Robert Frost (who remains well known today, though most people could not name a poet who published this year), who wrote lines such as "I took the one less traveled by" in his poetry, itself comprised of

everyday language in discussion of mundane and everyday human affairs, not taking strides beyond that people knew into new knowledge to be dissected as other fields of study did, most especially sciences in concern with the human mind.

Poetry is always ‘declining’, is always ‘dying’, and no doubt we do not interact with the zombies of our time the same way as we would the living. The nature of poetry is of course indicative of the nature of the culture and society present in which it is written - as the times change, and so too does the style and manner of reflection upon the human condition change with the world we are needed to comprehend around us. That poetry is resistant of stagnation in this way is indicative of vitality, for stagnation is itself another form of death. But whilst the contents and structure of poetry are indicative of the society it is written within, this relationship is purely one-sided, one-way, as the symptoms of an illness treated may not connote to any real cure. A thing can be alive and silent, present but without presence, and poetry has no doubt lost the strength of voice it had – less attention paid to it now than before. But it is as I previously stated: There is no doubt that poetry is an artform that, at the very least, exists in the American society of the twenty-first century and continues to.

As previously discussed, Whitman’s *Song of Myself* was written not only without outright scorn for what was previously considered the essential form of a poem – metre, repeated soundings, etc – but of ‘baser’, mundane concepts that were thereby less esoterically involved in advancing nor understanding humanity, whether as creatures or civilization. Yet was, and is, Whitman considered a monolithic author, indicative of what American writing is as its own subset of English language literature. And whereas the sciences used specific terms, used specific lenses by which to direct their pursuits, the ever-increasingly personal – confessional – nature of

American poetry made it both less applicable to the lives of a wider audience in focus upon the individualism of the author, their specific voice and circumstances, but seemingly without any broad direction which might be found ascribed to fields of study otherwise – each author, each poet, doing what they will with writing on their own. Thusly was poetry alienated from the public sphere as a result of the inherently personal nature the artform grew into, following Whitman’s wake.

Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997) is perhaps the most indicative of this change, their works considered emblematic of the height of Modernistic literature, themselves regarded as Whitman’s literary heir. In particular, his poem *Howl* is found to parallel the previously mentioned developments within the field of poetic writing near-perfectly: Ginsberg confessing to drug-use and his homosexual orientation within the work whilst using vulgar, casual, language whilst decrying the then-present face of American society as one who was disdained by its standards, by its values. That Ginsberg was arrested and the work censored after its initial publication further demonstrates the disconnect between the contents of *Howl* and the norms/values as held by the American public, perpetuated by its legislation and representatives in abashment of the poem. The use of language in description of urban life, in reference to politics, juxtaposes any notion of scholarly research, seemingly a rabid rant more than any sort of dissertation:

“... / with dreams, with drugs, with waking nightmares, alcohol and cock and endless balls, / ... / suffering Eastern sweats and Tangerian bone-grindings and migraines of China under junk-withdrawal in Newark’s bleak furnished room, / ... / who lounged hungry and lonesome through Houston seeking jazz or sex or soup, and followed the brilliant Spaniard to converse about America and Eternity, a hopeless task, and so took ship to Africa, / ... / who reappeared on the West Coast investigating the FBI in beards and shorts with big pacifist eyes sexy in their dark skin passing out incomprehensible leaflets, / who burned cigarette holes in their arms protesting the narcotic tobacco haze of Capitalism, / who distributed Supercommunist pamphlets in Union Square weeping and undressing while the sirens of Los Alamos wailed them down, and wailed down Wall, and the Staten Island ferry also wailed, / ... / who bit detectives in the neck and shrieked with delight in policecars for committing no crime but their own wild cooking pederasty and intoxication, / who howled on their knees in the subway and were dragged off the roof waving genitals and manuscripts, / who let themselves be fucked in

the ass by saintly motorcyclists, and screamed with joy, / who blew and were blown by those human seraphim, the sailors, caresses of Atlantic and Caribbean love, / who balled in the morning in the evenings in rosegardens and the grass of public parks and cemeteries scattering their semen freely to whomever come who may, / who hiccuped endlessly trying to giggle but wound up with a sob behind a partition in a Turkish Bath when the blond & naked angel came to pierce them with a sword, / who lost their loveboys to the three old shrews of fate the one eyed shrew of the heterosexual dollar the one eyed shrew that winks out of the womb and the one eyed shrew that does nothing but sit on her ass and snip the intellectual golden threads of the craftsman's loom, / who copulated ecstatic and insatiate with a bottle of beer a sweetheart a package of cigarettes a candle and fell off the bed, and continued along the floor and down the hall and ended fainting on the wall with a vision of ultimate cunt and come eluding the last gyzym of consciousness, / who sweetened the snatches of a million girls trembling in the sunset, and were red eyed in the morning but prepared to sweeten the snatch of the sunrise, flashing buttocks under barns and naked in the lake,..."

(Ginsberg).

Likewise are these same alienating concepts of personal assertion of the world found in the works of Robert Frost (1874 – 1963), albeit in a ‘tamer’ diction more in leu of the poetic forms which predated Whitman’s writing, yet touched by the disbaring of form all the same. The reader is unable to pull themselves from Frost’s perception of the world and the topics of his writing, the first-person intrinsic to the character of his writing and thus to the narrative created thereby, as evident in one such example of his poetry below:

“Some say the world will end in fire, / Some say in ice. / From what I’ve tasted of desire / I hold with those who favor fire. / But if it had to perish twice, / I think I know enough of hate / To say that for destruction ice / Is also great / And would suffice”

(Frost).

“I shall be telling this with a sigh / Somewhere ages and ages hence: / Two roads diverged in a wood, and I— / I took the one less traveled by, / And that has made all the difference”

(Frost).

In elaborating upon human life, its experiences, those that would be beholden to such information as presented by Frost are constrained to his singular perspective, his specific considerations, language and explanation neither vague nor punctual in creating a sense of fact.

The work is inseparable from the author's gaze, and so the author's life – and thus requires greater effort to digest on the part of the reader, rather than acceptance of what an expert has dictated via observations of recorded, cited, proofs. Again is poetry found outside the considerations and easy melding of the wider audience, and again is its language based in the casual vocabulary – though lacking in the force Ginsberg asserts over the reader via crude depictions of American life.

Stein: *Poetry's Afterlife: Verse in the Digital Age*: “A Digital Poetry Playlist: Varieties of Video and New Media Poetries”

The changing face and facets of the poetic form, as previously demonstrated in this paper within the confines of the leap between the Romantic of the nineteenth-century and the Modernist of the twentieth, are simultaneously indicative of the recurring knells of the art's death and yet inversely defining of a living, breathing entity – that which survives in the natural kingdom simultaneously that which is capable of adapting to its landscape. As the societal landscape of the American, and western, world as a whole is increasingly becoming more oriented around and dependent upon the rapid-developments of digital technologies in the twenty-first-century – which threaten the previous prevalence of print media as a whole – it would be expected then for the internet's permeation of media consumption and public engagement to likewise be found as responsible for yet another of poetry's 'deaths' and yet the catalyst for bringing the artform further into the future, an animal changing gradually to be suited to its habitat.

It is precisely this phenomenon Kevin Stein dedicates the seventh chapter of his book, *Poetry's Afterlife*, to the examination and explanation thereof, dissecting the abstract and seemingly incomparable form of 'New Media Poetry' as compared with the page-based print poetry of the recent past, optimistically stating that “The advent of digital technology has given birth to video and new media poetries created on and received via the computer. Each bristles with

revolutionary fervor. These electronic progeny aspire to resuscitate poetry...by thrusting verse culture into new potentialities of awareness” (Stein, 114) – and thereby asserting the media presence which authors such as Spaulding (discussed considerably earlier in this paper) denote as essential to the engagement with poetry as flourishing; despite the apparent ‘underground’ presence it seems to embody, even within existing poetic circles, Stein confessing to the clandestine nature of what is ultimately a recent development in the form poetry can take early on in the chapter as follows: “When I, as print-based poet, developed an interest in exploring the potential of digital poetic expression, not a single departmental colleague even vaguely knew what I was talking about...While I harbor my own reservations about technology, none of my traditional-poet friends regards new media creations even to be loosely poetic, let alone considers such expression to constitute a poem” (Stein, 119).

Video-based means served as preliminary, if revolutionary, first steps; Stein identifying its forms as followed in the first of two subsections: “There are two basic manifestations of video poetry: *docu-video-poems* and *filmic poems*” (Stein, 120). Expanding on both terms, Stein writes, “The first video poems arguably can be said to be humble videotapings of poets reading their works...” (Stein, 120); “The second broad category of video poetry, what I call ‘filmic poetry,’...[presents] an amalgam of spoken or written text, imagery, and music...In a gesture not far removed from MTV’s groundbreaking venture into music video,...” (Stein, 122) – the multisensory nature of such media better grasping its audience and a less daunting entry for those even minute and passing curiosity concerning what a poem is, better suited for spread over the increasingly digital means by which people communicate with one another. Whilst rudimentary in terms of it amounting to filming a voice-over of oration, “This freed poetry from the textbook

page and gave it body and voice” (Stein, 121) – and thus owing to the more abstract developments of art in digital spaces altogether.

Without digressing into more experimental pieces dependent upon the medium of the screen for its presentation, the removal of the poem from paper – mayhaps another ‘decline’ where the poetic purists, which arise in any age, are concerned – is a measure of poetry’s life: its presence within newly-developed means of information consumption proof it is being made, and being witnessed by the modern audience; as plants in arid soil are manifestations of the fact there is water to be found in such a climate, somehow. Poetry thrives, for there is enough that has taken shape in this form to warrant responses and investigations such as Stein’s (or this essay being read at this very moment), its seeking plausibly seeable as something more convenient when “...one cannot rightly be said to *read* many of these works, as one merely pushes the play button to set them in motion, often then interacting with and entering their spaces by clicking the computer’s mouse as a mode of play itself...one encounters a multisensory form that one *plays* as one would a film or an iPod...” (Stein, 116).

The act of reading is an active, taxing action: demanding attention and dissection on the part of the consumer, who rarely wants to work for their recreation in an era where convenience seems to trump other concerns; whereas the usage of our senses are passive, instinctive means ingrained within us of gathering information. Grappling with poetry is more approachable, when all that is asked of one is to sit and listen, the work itself thereby easily accessed through what has emerged as predominant nodes flocked to for information in general: platforms such as YouTube and Twitter which video more readily befits and which garner a larger audience than purely text-based sources. It is exploitative of the emerging norm of diminished attention-spans – a lower bar for entry entailing wide access, even preliminarily.

Gioia: *Disappearing Ink: Poetry at the End of Print Culture*: “Disappearing Ink: Poetry at the End of Print Culture”

Dana Gioia writes in full acceptance of the developing prominence of the digital (or rather, the electronic) landscape Stein notes the forays of poetry therein, opening her collection of essays vaguely centered around the changing nature of poetry with full concession to the death of print as the standard for communication and recreation: “...print has lost its primacy in communication...the new media have gradually changed not only the way we perceive language and ideas but also the world and ourselves...the average American now spends about twenty-four minutes a day reading, not just books but anything...Less than half of U.S. households now read daily papers, and many of the newspapers they do follow, such as *USA Today*, increasingly model their short-attention-span formats after television” (Gioia, 3) – such trends preceding the emergence of digital media as the prominent mode of information, Gioia’s collection of essays published in 2004. Hers is initially a piece that parallels the same concerns Spaulding exhibits towards the end of his article in noting the decline of poetry’s presence in media, and thus she muses: “What will be the poet’s place in a society that has increasingly little use for books...?” (Gioia, 5).

In consideration of the role the poet serves in a society where printed, page and ink contained, media has been set aside for the convenience of then-emerging technologies, Gioia asserts that poetry has been found to coincide with the development of popular media: “Without doubt the most surprising and significant development in recent American poetry has been the wide-scale and unexpected reemergence of popular poetry – namely rap, cowboy poetry, poetry slams, and certain overtly accessible types of what was once defiantly avant-garde genre, performance poetry...to become significant forces in American culture” (Gioia, 6-7). The

multisensory, orated form of poetry Stein was found to examine is paralleled here in the predominance of rap music as what is undeniably one of the most popular and profitable genres of music-media consumed and produced, originally emerging from the traditions of beat poetry, once confined to the early twentieth-century, instigated by poets such as Langston Hughes and finding new life in those such as Allen Ginsberg. This 'new' form carries much of this same DNA identifiable with trends found within the form, and overall "...hearkens back to poetry's origins as an oral art form in preliterate cultures, and it suggests how television, telephones, recordings, and radio have brought most Americans – consciously or unconsciously – into a new form of oral culture. Conventional literary poetry...could not be more different from these spoken and sometimes even improvisatory forms" (Gioia, 9-10). As such, the literary conception of poetry becomes inhibitive of fully expressing the life it finds in American society, Gioia writing that "...the orthodox views of contemporary poetry no longer are either useful or accurate in portraying the rapidly changing shape of the art" (Gioia, 6).

Where the trends of consumption of information find the exclusively written form to be in decline, the living genre adapts to the trends of the time – poetry has done this to become unrecognizable, in much the same way William Blake is incomparable to Walt Whitman, and *Beowulf* to anything Shakespearean. The addition of the usage of other senses to the experience of poetry has thereby made it into something apprehensively poetic, and difficult to regard in the wider consciousness as deliberately connected. Rap, definingly, is "...performed aloud to an elaborate, sampled rhythm track" (Gioia, 9), inseparable from its usage of sound outside the speaking of language as accompanied by an exclusively musical component, and thereby rendered as "...the unusual mixture of radical innovation and unorthodox traditionalism in the structure of the work itself and the modes of its performance, transmission, and reception" (Gioia, 8).

Rap, and similar forms of oration, thus are a Ship of Theseus within the poetic context – changing its parts so drastically yet reminiscent of this vague origin that whether it is that same first rendition is called into question. The two in consciousness are of course different, their terminologies different, their conceptions in the minds of consumers different – any English professor would wince to hear a student lecture how Eminem may be likened to the greats of literature – though is this same disconnect not found in comparing the contentious differences of Modernism to the classical traditions of past literature? Works such as Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* spit in the face of what could be considered literature even by the standards of the time in which it was published, the main character disappearing for great swaths of the novel, the author inserting himself to interrupt the narrative with exposition, a whole chapter written as though it were a play as opposed to a novel: is it so inconceivable then that something as incomparable as Rap may be considered ‘poetry’ then?

Works of contemporary poetry stand for themselves as evident of endurance in consciousness via transformation into something unrecognizable, befitting their adaptation to mediums of access and consumption from the printed page and into digital or oral landscapes – these the core of what Stein and Gioia write in argument of, poetry changing into something held as ‘else’. Rupi Kaur and Amanda Gorman, two of the most well-known American poets of the twenty-first century, embody such: Kaur owing the success of her works to their short, sweet, and digestible nature which allowed them to flourish on social media, beset by character limits and encouraging the prevalence of shortened media; and Gorman finding large audiences via the social and political relevance of her poetry, finding kinship with events to which a magnitude of attention

is paid, the inauguration of President Biden and the Superbowl specifically, and thus exclusively oral, performative in their aspect in accompaniment of the performance of these events.

The works Gorman had written prior to her readings at both of these events were specifically tailored around the nature and contents of these events themselves, referring to them; and thus their impact and meaning inseparable from the performance around her, its identity ingrained within the context it is written in a manner unlike the popular poetry of the past. Whilst of course all authors are influenced by the trend and concerns of their time – Ginsberg writing specifically about what he felt to be the horrid nature of the American political and urban landscape, T.S. Eliot writing about the dishevelment of humanity in the wake of two world wars, and so on – Gorman’s most well-known pieces are defined by their attachment explicitly, made in tangent with the events themselves as part of their presentation to the American audience, not simply art made in relation to its influences; this presented in blatant allusions concerning the events as found in samples of both aforementioned pieces below – *The Hill We Climb* and *Chorus of the Captains* respectively:

“When day comes we ask ourselves, / where can we find light in this never-ending shade? / The loss we carry, / a sea we must wade / We’ve braved the belly of the beast / We’ve learned that / quiet isn’t always peace / And the norms and notions / of what just is / Isn’t always just-ice / And yet the dawn is ours / before we knew it / Somehow we do it / Somehow we’ve weathered and witnessed / a nation that isn’t broken / but simply unfinished / We the successors of a country and a time / Where a skinny Black girl / descended from slaves and raised by a single mother / can dream of becoming president / only to find herself reciting for one / And yes we are far from polished / far from pristine / but that doesn’t mean we are / striving to form a union that is perfect / We are striving to forge a union with purpose / To compose a country committed to all cultures, colors, characters and / conditions of man...”

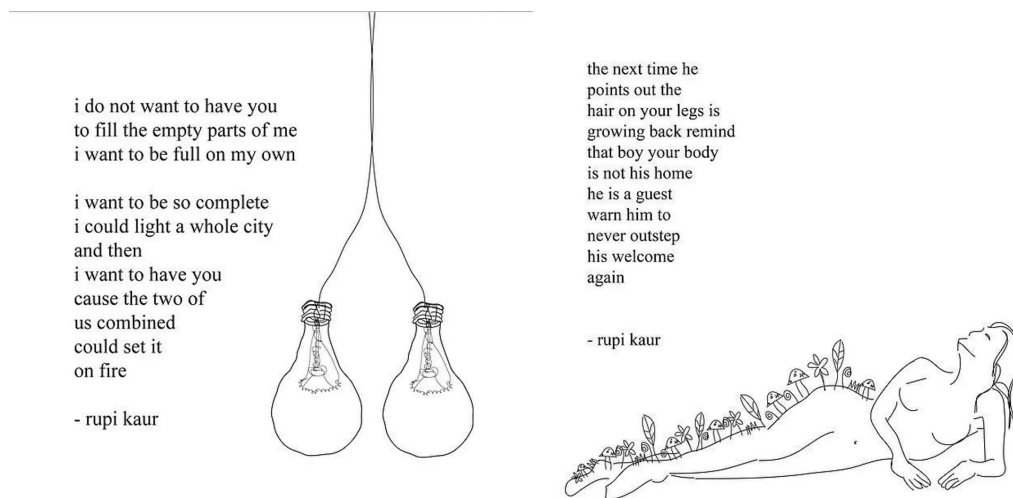
(Gorman)

Today we honor our three captains / For their actions and impact in / A time of uncertainty and need. / They’ve taken the lead, / Exceeding all expectations and limitations, / Uplifting their communities and neighbors / As leaders, healers and educators. / James has felt the wounds of warfare, / But this warrior still shares / His home with at-risk kids. / During Covid, he’s even lent a hand / Live-streaming football for family and fans. / Trimaine is an educator who works nonstop, / Providing his community with hotspots, / Laptops

and tech workshops, / So his students have all the tools / They need to succeed in life and in school. / Suzie is the ICU nurse manager at a Tampa hospital. / Her chronicles prove that even in tragedy, hope is possible. / She lost her grandmothers to the pandemic, / And fights to save other lives in the ICU battle zone, / Defining the front line heroes risking their lives for our own”

(Gorman)

Likewise are works such as Rupi Kaur’s inseparable from the medium in which they obtained an initial audience and spread, her short and easily-digestible works accompanied by visual illustrations finding rapid popularity in the 2010’s; her printing of her first collection of such poems in 2014, *Milk and Honey*, resulting only from the fervor which her sharing of her writing in online spaces, Tumblr and Instagram specifically, were received.



The visual elements accompanying her works are thereby intrinsically woven as part of the writing itself – and thus a prerequisite to sharing/referring to the piece of media as I have above – social media such as those she shared her creations on predominantly based in the sharing of images and gifs as opposed to text-based creations (not that more traditional e-authors are non-existent and without platforms), the short and simple nature of Kaur’s vocabulary and diction alongside this spread on a freely-accessed platform creating a piece of art uniquely accessible despite the reputation of obtuse academic discourse among its forbearing influences – the poets

of the past which are stacked in educational and academic study. Esotericism is set aside for a wide and mundane relatability, the poetry standing as something not necessarily intent on being ‘read’ and dissected as mayhaps other authors would expect of their pieces; this apparent ‘decline’ in the educational and scholarly value seemingly pretentious when *Milk and Honey* as a complete text has sold over three million copies – a success inapplicable to the past giants of the literary landscape who often saw little in the ways of popularity in their lives, and in contrast to all the myriad laments of poetry’s catastrophic end which have been suffered for decades upon decades.

Conclusion:

The transference of poetry’s embodiment onto facets initially held as unpoetic or unindicative of quality literary value has historically been evocative of how poetry has changed and entered each new cultural age within the canon of, at the very least, English literature. Geoffrey Chaucer brought the form into what would evolve into our version of the English language, initially held as an unpoetic tongue during a time in which England post-Norman Conquest predominantly spoke French within its aristocratic circles, and likewise did Whitman near five centuries later abolish the idea of organized, verse-constrained poetics; these influences upon the genre not such far-cries from the adaptations of the artform of poetry to better suite the predominantly passive-sensory and shortened composition of consumable media – whether visual in the form of film poetry or orally performative as is found in those genres of music which herald upon poetry’s earlier traditions prior to print-domination, such as Rap; or in the hyper-condensed form as found in popular contemporary collections of poetic writing such as *Milk and Honey*. In widening the conception of poetry to include those forms influenced by what was arguably greater ages of social relevance, one can argue the form to thrive still today, more prevalent and more accessible to a wouldbe audience than ever.

Adherence to mortality, resistance to change, is instinctive of humanity, and there are reasons that social conservatives always seem to exist in every place, every age, of human history. What is cannot last, and we must embrace this fact, and not let our biological instinct to preserve what is ours abash the various experiences and developments human creation might thrust itself forward and into. That the poetic content of our contemporary age has arisen to be so drastically different in shape and content from the works of the twentieth-century in befitting the new popular standards of recreation and media distribution/consumption – based in the internet and swerving from the restrictions of print – must be assertive of the artform’s continual endurance despite its anachronistic regard. Even if only brushing predominantly popular media attention in its traditional form – Amanda Gorman and her works standing in stark defiance of that anonymity – poetry is written, and poetry is consumed, whether ‘read’ or engaged with otherwise. That the modes presenting held in academic focus are found in scarcity, or sought in much the same, whilst yet another of the ‘deaths’ authors such as Donald Hall decry, need not be the measure of the literary genre’s health. If languages such as English can change over the course of centuries, words readily abandoned or new lingo embraced for their fleeting time, it would entail that art as based in language can likewise take new shapes. *Milk and Honey* doesn’t need to be *Beowulf*, and we need not to submit to the past when the world is something different now, and us with it. In lieu of the original oral tradition does song – and Rap most intimately – carry on the tradition of what came before, as English carries forward remnant artifacts of what was once a slew of vocabulary once in possession of a handful of different, mingled languages.

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