

## Jorie Graham

*Is the poet today charged with a social task or mandate as representative of shared values and ideas?*

This is a conventionally held truth regarding the status of the reading public, for poetry, at present, both in Italy, it appears, and in the United States. I presume these assumptions must feel true to other European societies.

I simply do not find that it corresponds to my experience. In the United States, for example, about 40 million people answered yes to the question (asked as a «diversionary» question by a Gallup poll conducted on political issues): do you read or write poetry? That would be about a third of the adult population of the country. Now, who are these people? Are they evident to academics? Probably not. Are they evident to their local libraries – from which they borrow books, and through which they join small reading groups – probably yes. Are they evident to the small independent booksellers – chances are good. Are they evident to the huge chain bookstores who more and more drive the independent local bookstores out of business – no. Do they tend to buy the books they read – no, they are part of a huge lending culture, as well as a culture of xeroxing, or «copying out». Do they memorize and recite poems, you bet. Have I run in to them: all over the place. Whenever I read in large venues – preferably those not run by universities – they are in attendance. Do they have books for me to sign, no rarely, because, they explain, the books are awfully expensive and they get the work by other means. Do they think about poetry in a way that we would think of as «critical» – no, not usually, they tend, rather, to «use» poetry for their life purposes. The younger ones share on the internet – all over the place. The older ones do so by some of the means I have described above. Where are substantial poetry readerships to be found (and large poetry collections): in hospices, hospitals, prisons, high schools, local libraries, military bases, seminaries, adult education programs – among professional fishermen, taxi drivers, nightguards, firefighters, primary school teachers, actors, bankers and so on... I know this because these are people who are always sending books, letters, requests and so on. And also because, as I said above, I find them coming to speak to me after I read, usually in large venues not associated with universities, in rural areas all over the country, as well as in big cities.

Why are they invisible to academics, literary publishers, critics – and so on? For a few reasons (some already implied above). First of all, these people read «poetry» – this does not mean «new» poetry, nor is it simply «classic» or «canonical» poetry that they read. They read whatever they find – whatever someone passes on – sometimes Dickinson, sometimes Ashbery. One thing I have found is that their thirst for the medium is rather large. And, too, that their supposed sense that the medium is «difficult» is rather off base. People who use poetry, and read it regularly, are «readers» of poetry, in other words they have learned the ways in which it is a different language than prose, and they do not tend to take their prose-reading habits (expecting a certain kind of expository logic, for example) to it, not do they tend to take the strategies they have developed for reading journalism, or fiction, or drama, or any other form of writing to it, and so they do not find its difficulties surprising. It is as if we were talking about people who listen to Opera, or Jazz – they have learned how to «read» the vocabulary of their medium – they do not expect to be able to access either one of those musical forms with the tools, say, pop music, will have required of them. They know it is a skill and they have acquired it. Not by thinking about it, but by reading continuously. Someone who has read a lot of Dickinson will «speak» Dickinson. They will not find her difficult. Whereas someone who just picks her up at random, in a general anthology, and expects that just «reading-in-general» – what we call essential meaning-gathering literacy – will suffice, is going to feel lost, excluded, disconnected from the astonishing and transforming experience which the reading of poetry yields.

Of course it changes with the generations – kids used to hearing the lyrics of much good music will have no problem with the leaping, oftentimes irrational, strategies of a poem. But, too, if a person who dreams, or daydreams, or just finds themselves thinking of one thing while feeling another (a common experience for a human mind and spirit), isn't taught to be afraid of that kind of mental activity – that kind of giving-over-to-another-force – then they will find they not only get poetry, they will want access to it, develop a thirst for the experiences to which it, uniquely, gives them access.

I find that this whole conversation is about something else, something theories of our current historical predicament need to transfer onto poetry. It also

involves the blindness of people in the highest intellectual circles regarding their own culture. They should get out beyond the smart set. They would find readers. Lots of them.

*Is poetic language's lack of communicability a consequence of poetry's loss of its social representativeness and relevance?*

Well, if something feels like it is «distant from the real world», we have to first of all try to understand what is meant by «real» in this context. Again we seem to be dealing with theoretical organizations of thought rather than with experience. The real world, in poetry, has never been expected to be, by the reader, a recognizable world, a realistic world, a world that resembles or refers to this one in which he or she is currently living. Otherwise why do surrealist poems written in French translate into the hearts of strange new generations in China or India or Iraq? What are all these new readers making of, say, Rimbaud, for example? Or Neruda – the Chinese adore him. And why on earth does the young man at the cash register of the Standa in Naples quote Emily Dickinson's poems to me? A great poem transcends this problem – it accesses a place which is, for all the apparent outdatedness of the term, somewhat universal. It is universal because it has delved so deeply into its «local» material (whether subjective or objective) that it has hit paydirt, universality, what Eliot calls an «objective correlative». This is a singular power of poetry – a form of magic and worksong – a way humans have of speaking about something which isn't really in the speakable. However much the poem might have an apparent «subject» it is always «about» something else, something that cannot be paraphrased. People across all sorts of boundaries – cultural, historical, linguistic, experiential – feel, get, are inhabited by, that unparaphrasable thing. That's what poetry is: what is NOT lost in translation.

Then there is a cultural/political attitude towards this very process I have just described: mystery and things that transmit a great deal of power to the individual are very threatening to marketplace capitalism, a structure which needs to control a great deal of the human soul. Access to that side of one which can feel mystery – which can rest in uncertainty without irritable reaching after fact and reason (to quote Keats on «Negative Capability») is dangerous to a market culture. Free people? There is much to be lost, for such a culture, by the thrusting of the person towards their intuitive side – (a side from which much resistance and action can be fueled) (a side which feeds a part of

the human spirit starving today in the powerlessness inflicted by its overdependence on technology). Yes there are a lot of what you are calling «amateur writers» whose work might seem trivial, whose worlds might not transcend the personal – but there have always been such poets. Think of all the «scribblers» in every language, the minor court poets, the followers and imitators, the gentlemen poets, the young men and woman whose education consisting in writing verse. Even Milton complained of it! All the seducers. And this not only in the leisure classes. Do we not cast a blind eye on most of our history when we get so appalled at the number of young poets we seem to be spawning? Is it bad when a culture has *too many of its young people trying to make poems*? This is a problem? Now really, I ask you? At least they are crazed and idealistic and are attending to language at some level other than sheer buying and selling. And further, to my mind, all these «amateur writers» are often just «citizens trying to awaken». To awaken from the stupor of false desires. Not that they will succeed, and not that their poems – when bad – will do much more than remain private discourses (that is the definition of lousy writing, it stays, even to good readers such as the ones I described above, private; it does not, at some level, «get across»). They do no harm writing amateur poems. Amateur poems have been written by healthy societies – in far larger numbers than those in our world today – throughout history. In every language. The question is, why we would ask this question – what is it about professionalism, as we think about it, that this unstoppable amateur action so threatens? Who ever thought many great poems were going to be written by any given moment, in any given language? No one. Great poems are few and far between. Always. But poetry is a *practice*, a practice of attention, a way of keeping awake, a way of keeping your intuition and senses alive – a practice which cultures have turned to throughout what we call «civilized» times. And even before that. It is magic, and accesses powers other than human powers, in some views. It is also very hard to lie to people whose intuition has not been shut down. Everything in our culture today conspires to shut us down. Every kid who picks up a pen to write a poem or a song is trying to fight to stay awake, un-numb, ready to feel the hard emotions – including a great deal of fear. Ready to let formal articulation give him or her access to a kind of transpersonal power. Is it any good? Does it matter? Time will sort all that out. A few things that matter will float to the surface and last. A culture needs hundreds of amateur poets (so called) to be writing at any given moment in order to give rise to one lasting or essential voice. That voice matters for history. But not

for the most essential thing, which is that the *practice* – a particular use of language and motion of mind – stays alive in a people. That it keep their language – as used by advertisers, and politicians and so on – from oversimplifying their reality, their emotional range, their capacity for genuine inquiry. No one in power wants people who are awake. I cannot stress this point enough. You can draw all the conclusions from it: even your phrase «the anarchy of individual talent» is speaking to this point. Even your fear of the ego. An ego has a body, a conscience, a shit-detector, a vote. Take away an ego's vote and it has a gun, it has a rock.

*To what extent does poetry today contribute to the renewal of ordinary language or the language of culture? Is it possible to acknowledge songs as having that social representativeness that has for long pertained to poetry?*

We have both, that is good. We have always had both. The relative ascendancy of one over the others changes in different periods. They serve different functions. I believe I have outlined them above. One is part of a collective experience, one keeps alive the place of the solitary experience in the subjectivity of the individual. Many people have both experiences.

They usually have had both in history. Crowds, song. Individuals, lyric. Then there are the crossovers and the exceptions. We are amazingly fruitful. I am not as worried as you about the state of our poetry. There are kids in Iraq who recite poems in order to fall asleep at night. They tell me about it. They carry books of poems over there. They also have a lot of music. One interesting difference, the US Army uses music in battle, to keep the morale up, to block out emotions that might get in the way. Our kids shoot to the sounds of great pop, rap and rock music. It would be very hard to get them pumped up in that way – o get the headsets on and the triggers ready – to zap them up like a drug – on poetry. Perhaps that's worth thinking about? How quickly music makes you go into «crowd emotion», as Elias Canetti would have it. How much it makes you one kind of an «us». The «us/them» kind of 'us'. Poetry tends, at its best, to make you feel commonality in a different way. To make you feel a «I/we». There has always been a bugle boy. There has always been the epic account. There has always been the lyric cry. There has always been need for the elegy.

We might think more has changed than has indeed changed. We might wish more had.

[a cura di Antonella Francini]

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Rodin, *Il Poeta e la Musa*