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defending  
poetry

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legislators of the world.

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Poets have been on the run since Plato announced in the *Republic* (fourth century B.C.) that “there is an ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry.” Speaking in the voice of Socrates, he argued that poets should be kicked out of the ideal republic. They were no good because they imitated nature, which is itself an imitation of the ideal world—a heavenly kingdom of “reality” that surpasses these imperfect reflections everywhere presented to the human senses. With metaphysical slyness, Plato maintained that the poet “is an imitator, and therefore, like all other imitators, he is thrice removed from the king and from the truth.”<sup>1</sup> (The “king” here is the ideal form.) But there were other, perhaps more practical, reasons for getting the poets out of the way.

The business of the state, in Plato’s view, was to protect the young from corruption, and poets corrupt them by exciting feelings that do not promote decent and patriotic behavior. (One of the ironies here is that Socrates himself—a fearless teacher of the young—was condemned to death for corrupting the youth of Athens with his free-thinking ideas. Indeed, I often wonder what Socrates would have thought if, coming back from the dead, he had read the words that his student Plato had put into his mouth.) Even Homer, chief among the Greek poets, was not spared crit-

icism. "Friend Homer," Socrates quips with a condescending smile, "if you are able to discern what pursuits make men better or worse in private or public life, tell us what State was ever better governed by your help?" The implied answer, of course, is "none." Homer may have entertained and titillated his audience, but he assisted nobody in governing a state. He may even have made things more difficult for them by stimulating feelings that could not easily be contained and by implicitly questioning the wisdom of the gods and earthly rulers. Certainly nobody who has read the *Iliad* (I remember actually weeping over its pages when I first read it, in college) has come away from the experience believing that war is a good, useful, and rational thing, or that its pursuit is anything but destructive and evil.

Socrates (or Plato's fictionalized version of his teacher) whips himself into a frenzy over poetry in the *Republic*, arguing that poets promote petty emotions such as "lust and anger and all the other affections, of desire and pain and pleasure, which are held to be inseparable from every action." He complains that poetry "feeds and waters the passions instead of drying them up." So poetry militates against "happiness and virtue" by softening up its readers, making them prey to all sorts of dangerous and corrupting emotions. Only "the hymns of the gods and praises of famous men" are considered useful for the state and therefore satisfactory as themes for poets. "If you go beyond this," Socrates warns, "and allow the honeyed muse to enter, either in epic or lyric verse, not law and the reason of mankind, which by common consent have ever been deemed best, but pleasure and pain will be the rulers in our State."

Plato did not manage to sink the art of poetry, but the light of suspicion has continued to shine on poets ever since he raised these objections. Poets are the wayward ones, the voices of protest against authority, the defenders of powerful feeling over fierce intellection, the abettors of all forms of disgusting and irreverent behavior. They lead the young astray, offering them a swig of wine, luring them into opium dens. They promote sensuality, even free love. They denounce presidents and prime ministers and generally ridicule governments as well as the educational establishment. Their language is as loose as their morals. When the popular audience today in the United States thinks of a poet, Allen Ginsberg comes to mind: the bearded hippie, antiwar activist, and sexual “deviant” who wrote, in “America”: “Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb.” To a degree, all this mistrust can be traced to Plato and his dismissive views of poetry.

Plato set the terms of the argument, initiating a dialogue that continues to this day. Among his first interlocutors were Aristotle, Horace, and Longinus—the most prominent of ancient defenders of poetry. Aristotle uses the term broadly to include drama as well as verse. Like Plato, he regards poets as imitators of nature, but this does not strike him as a problem. The music of poetry attracted him, as it has always attracted its admirers. He suggests that “rhythm, tune, and meter” are essential to poetry, its foundation, and locates the urge to write poems in two places that lie “deep in our nature.” There is first the instinct for imitation: we naturally wish to reproduce things observed or felt. This is what separates us from other living creatures. Second, we have an instinctive love of harmony and rhythm, which is why we perk up

when we hear a drumbeat in the distance, why our foot begins to tap when a catchy tune is struck. He writes: "Persons, therefore, starting with this natural gift developed by degrees their special attitudes, till their rude improvisations gave birth to poetry."<sup>2</sup>

In other words, as human beings we want to replicate things that we sense, and we like to do so in pleasing ways. Poets are simply people who seek to perfect this form of imitation. Aristotle steps neatly around the question of content in poetry, unlike Horace, the Roman poet and friend of the great emperor Augustus. Horace had Plato firmly in mind when he wrote his famous defense of poetry, the *Ars poetica*, in the second decade B.C. "To have good sense," he writes confidently, "is the first principle and fountain of writing well." Good sense requires a sense of moderation, a feel for what might encourage youthful readers to behave in decent ways. "The Socratic papers will direct you in the choice of your subjects," he tells young writers, referring to Plato's Socrates. The reader of poems must, above all, learn "what he owes his country, and what to his friends." He must also understand "with what affection a parent, a brother, and a stranger, are to be loved," and know as well "what is the duty of a senator, what of a judge; what the duties of a general sent out to war." Horace implies that poetry is useful because it can both teach and delight at the same time and therefore has utilitarian value.<sup>3</sup>

Like Plato and Aristotle, Horace sees the poet as an "imitator of nature," but he is unwilling to dismiss the entire art of poetry on these grounds: "I should direct the learned imitator to have regard for the mode of nature and manners, and thence draw his

expressions to life.” In other words, the poet’s imitation of nature (human nature as well as the natural world) must approximate the “mode” of what he or she imitates. That is, poetry must not distort reality. It must conjure an accurate representation of everyday life, what can be seen and heard and felt, and readers must judge the accuracy of these representations.

Horace ends his essay with a warning to readers: “Those who are wise avoid a mad poet, and are afraid to touch him.” (In other words, don’t listen to the likes of Allen Ginsberg.) That such words should come from one of the major Roman poets is worth noting. This attitude defines Horace and his poetic project. As Gordon Williams observes, Horace was already an influential poet at the time this essay appeared, and he was writing—like most poets—to justify his own art. *Ars poetica* is “a work characterized by the imprint of an individual personality which dominates the tone and controls the material.” Its relevance, says Williams, “adds up to an attitude to poetry, an expression of professionalism and a sense of critical standards, a hatred of humbug and of too easily won approval.”<sup>4</sup>

That Horace addressed a select audience of sophisticated, court-centered readers is obvious in everything he did. He is, after all, the man who wrote (not without irony), “I despise the vulgar masses, and push them away.”<sup>5</sup> There is everywhere in his work a sense that poetry should educate the young in the manners and sentiments appropriate for those who might become statesmen. Such an attitude is not uncommon throughout classical Greece and Rome, where the drumbeats of Plato could al-

ways be heard in the distance. Needless to say, poets have rarely conformed to thematic constraints in ways that would have satisfied Plato. From Homer onward, they have written movingly about the ruins of war, about the demands of conscience, about bodily love and the seductions of nature. They have occasionally gone way over the edge in describing religious emotions, reaching for mystical heights, contesting the gods as well as praising them. In general, passions are rarely kept on a leash.

Toward the end of the first century A.D., the critic known as Longinus (of whom almost nothing is known) wrote "On the Sublime," an influential treatise on what makes for intense feeling in poetry and prose. By "the sublime," he refers to all that is noble and grand, generous and affecting. What is sublime is also that which continues to inspire over time, across cultures and languages. Longinus writes: "For that is really great which bears a repeated examination, and which is difficult or rather impossible to withstand, and the memory of which is strong and hard to efface."<sup>6</sup> The point has never been put more boldly, to greater effect.

The influence of Longinus is hard to overestimate. He put a finger on the use of poetry and defended it against all detractors, especially Plato. His sentiments played out in various ways in the centuries that followed, but there is no doubt about his belief in the powers of language to transform reality, to affect readers in deep and permanent ways. For him poetry makes it possible for people to live more intensely, with a greater awareness of the life that confronts them. It helps them to cope with the vagaries of

their existence. Poetry lifts them onto higher ground, where they can survey the ruins of civilization with a perspective that allows for equanimity, even elation.

The wisdom of the ancients was lost during the medieval period, the “dark ages.” That is the traditional view, and it bears some resemblance to the truth, given that the writings of the Greek classical authors were not widely available until the twelfth century. A revival of learning occurred during the early modern period, when a rebirth (“renaissance”) of interest in classical literature occurred. One of the big ideas about poetry that was revived was the notion that it could both “teach and delight” its readers, as Horace put it. A number of poets responded to this renewal of interest, including Dante, who wrote the *Divine Comedy* in the early fourteenth century. He ranks with Homer and Shakespeare among the poets who appeal to readers across the barriers of time and language. Indeed, T. S. Eliot called him “the most *universal* of poets in the modern languages.”<sup>7</sup>

Eliot’s defense of Dante has a quality of special pleading to it, but one must note the obvious: poetry had a marvelous practitioner in Dante, and it is always in specific examples that an age comes to believe in the power of poetry to transform lives, to make readers see themselves and their world more clearly, and to lead those readers toward a more vivid and conscious life. Poetry extends the boundaries of thought by extending the boundaries of expression itself. Poets articulate thoughts and feelings in ways that clarify both; they hold a mirror of sorts up to the mind if not to the world, and their poems reflect our deepest imaginings,



our hopes for ourselves and our society. Poetry offers concrete images that draw into their figures a reflection and embodiment of our lives. At its best, poetry is a language adequate to our experience.

During the Renaissance, a wide range of philosophers and critics came to the defense of poetry. Perhaps the most famous articulation of the case occurred in the “Apology for Poetry” by Sir Philip Sidney. An English gentleman par excellence, Sidney did everything right: born rich, he rode a horse, managed a large estate, married well, and commanded men in battle (he died soon after the Battle of Arnheim in 1586, as a consequence of having taken a musket ball in the leg). He was himself a splendid poet and a scholar as well, having studied the classics at Oxford. Like a masterful attorney, he could marshal evidence on a grand scale, and his treatise reads like a legal defense, an elegant one, with arguments based on his reading of (now obscure) writers such as Erasmus, Thomas More, Julius Scaliger, Peter Ramus, and Pietro Bembo. The range of his learning was not only exhaustive, it was exhausting, and one can easily recoil from Sidney’s methodical approach, tantamount to overkill. Nevertheless, he defends poetry in ways that have profoundly influenced modern thinking about the art and its use in the world.

Drafted in 1580, the “Apology” was published in its current form after Sidney’s death. It argues that “of all writers under the sun, the poet is the least liar.”<sup>8</sup> Once again, Plato is the opponent, the man who considered poets liars because they imitated nature, which is itself an imitation of the ideal. As Sidney explains, poetry creates “fictional” statements that are “true.” They

are not meant as literal copies of higher or ideal reality. Any statement is provisional, as Ramus argued before him. For Sidney, poetry has much to do with self-fashioning, with creating an identity. It offers a unique picture of the world, one that is not wholly dependent on verifiable reality; it achieves its own reality, which cannot easily be dismissed. In this, Sidney reflects rather sophisticated “modern” ideas about language and its relation to reality that would have been familiar to educated readers in the late sixteenth century.

Sidney is not terribly worried about the Platonic problem of imitation (*mimesis*). “There is no art delivered unto mankind that hath not the works of nature for his principal object, without which they could not consist, and on which they so depend, as they become actors and players, as it were, of what nature will have set forth.” God imagines the world, and human beings—who were created in the image of God—replicate this process. The poet becomes godlike, creating realities or “fictions” much as God has done. But whereas scientists as well as historians must somehow attempt to approximate reality in their prose, poets create their own truths, which are not literal and therefore cannot be subject to the criticisms that Plato and others would force upon them. The poet, says Sidney, works through metaphors. Scientists, historians, and philosophers do this as well, whether or not they acknowledge it. Here Sidney gives poets the upper hand because they know what they are doing. They work in metaphors self-consciously, having learned how. Indeed, Sidney lifts the poet well above these others, who are tied to literal realities that they can only imitate badly and probably distort. The

poet furnishes the world with fresh knowledge, combining the gift of speech (*oratio*) with the gift of reason (*ratio*), creating figures on the page that become a substance themselves, interpreting reality as much as reflecting it. The poet is “full of virtue-breeding delightfulness, and void of no gift that ought to be in the noble name of learning.” The whole question of imitation melts away here, irrelevant. In this, Sidney foreshadows a key aspect of postmodern thought, with its emphasis on truth as a subjective creation, unverifiable but needing no verification.

Modern ideas about the value of poetry have their deepest roots in the Romantic era, that wonderfully productive period in the arts that began in Germany in the eighteenth century and spread to England and America in the nineteenth. It was a movement that prized self-expression and preferred passionate feelings to dry, intellectual arguments. Romantic artists stood on the edge of society, offering critiques and bold counterexamples. They mistrusted authority. Most important, they celebrated the natural world, which they regarded as holy, almost a spirit in itself. They moved well beyond the classical idea that poetry should instruct the young in good morals. In his preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), William Wordsworth—among the most influential of the English Romantic poets—puts forward a few essential ideas about poetry, ideas that have hardly shifted in two centuries. First, Wordsworth regards poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling” that takes the form of “emotion recollected in tranquility.” In this, poetry stands in opposition to science and history. Talking about the origins of poetry, he speculates that

the earliest poets “wrote from passion excited by real events; they wrote naturally, and as men: feeling powerfully as they did, their language was daring, and figurative.” Wordsworth separates poets from others on the grounds of sensibility; the poet is “endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness.” He is “pleased with his own passions and volitions” and “rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him.” Finally, Wordsworth argues that the purpose of poetry is “to produce excitement in co-existence with an overbalance of pleasure.” Thus poetry serves to widen the sensibilities of readers and to broaden their sympathies.<sup>9</sup>

In setting poets apart from others, Wordsworth invites the disdain of society. I will agree with society here, believing it foolish to think of poets as having finer and more pronounced feelings than others. They experience the same feelings as most human beings; they simply have a knack for putting feelings into words and a gift for working within the conventions of poetic expression. In most cases, they will have spent some time studying the craft of poetry, learning how to embody their emotions and refine their ideas in the language and forms we refer to as poetry.

Wordsworth’s close friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge (co-author of *Lyrical Ballads*) generally shared the conception of poetry put forward in the “Preface,” but he was more philosophical by nature and rooted his ideas in theories of creativity acquired by reading German philosophy and criticism of the eighteenth century (where the origins of Romantic theory will be found in such writers as Friedrich and A. W. von Schlegel, J. C. F. von Schiller, and J. G. Herder, among others.) In *Biographia Literaria* (1817),

a book of literary musings that has been hugely influential, Coleridge puts forward his essential ideas about poetry, distancing himself from Wordsworth in subtle ways. “A poem is that species of composition,” he writes, “which is opposed to works of science, by proposing for its immediate object pleasure, not truth; and from all other species (having this object in common with it) it is discriminated by proposing to itself such delight from the whole, as is compatible with a distinct gratification from each component part.” He defines poetry in terms of poets themselves. “What is poetry?” he asks, noting that this “is so nearly the same question with, what is a poet?” He concludes: “The poet, described in *ideal* perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity. . . . He diffuses a tone and spirit of unity, that blends, and (as it were) *fuses*, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination.” This power—the literary imagination—“reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities.”<sup>10</sup>

Coleridge divides the imagination into two parts, primary and secondary: “The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repletion in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary Imagination I consider as an echo of the former.” The primary imagination is initial perception: how we assemble the world at a glance. Poetry comes into play with the secondary imagination, as the poet takes what is given by the senses, dissolves it, then reconstitutes this reality to form a counterreality. The process involves an elaborate dialectic, an interplay of reality and the imagination, that seems a bit more

complicated than anything Wordsworth had in mind when he wrote about poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling.” Coleridge describes an organic process, one that occurs naturally in the creative imagination, wherever that resides; it involves perception and destruction and reconstitution.

The organic metaphor was central to thinking about poetry during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and Coleridge often used it. As M. H. Abrams notes, Coleridge held that “literary invention involves the natural, unplanned, and unconscious process by which things grow.”<sup>11</sup> Like a plant, the poet gathers material from the atmosphere around him and puts out branches and leaves. The poem itself, also like a plant, begins with a seed or “germ.” It finds its natural or inherent shape, having assimilated materials from the atmosphere. The metaphor is powerful and remains influential among critics, who often shrink from a work of art that seems mechanical or in some way distorted; indeed, one commonly hears it suggested that a poem or play or novel should be “organic.” The individual parts should work together to create a unified impression. It should be integrated, made whole.

Some critics found Wordsworth and Coleridge excessive in their regard for poetry, and one of these was Thomas Love Peacock, known mainly for his novels. In an essay called “The Four Ages of Poetry” (1820), he launches an amusing attack on Wordsworth’s ideas, taking particular aim at the notion that poetry had its origins in the gestures of our primitive ancestors, who banged on drums and danced in circles around a fire, chanting. Nevertheless, he acknowledges the force of primitive poetry. “In the

origin and perfection of poetry,” he argues, “all the associations of life were composed of poetic materials. With us, it is decidedly the reverse.” He suggests that poetry has become an anachronism in an era when science, philosophy, and economics reign supreme. Such remarks were bound to elicit criticism from poets and lovers of poetry, and they did, including an eloquent and influential defense of poetry by Peacock’s friend Percy Bysshe Shelley, then at the height of his poetic powers.<sup>12</sup>

In “A Defence of Poetry” (1821), Shelley questions many of Peacock’s assumptions, making his own exaggerated claims: “Poetry enlarges the circumference of the imagination by replenishing it with thoughts of ever new delight, which have the power of attracting and assimilating to their own nature all other thoughts, and which form new intervals and interstices whose void forever craves fresh food. Poetry strengthens the faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man, in the same manner as exercise strengthens a limb.” Using a popular analogy, he compares human beings to the Aeolian harp or wind chime. Winds blow over this passive instrument, drawing forth “their ever-changing melody.” Shelley refines the analogy to suggest that people are different in that they actually harmonize the various winds, unifying them, creating new wholes from disparate elements. This is the important work of the poem: to unify otherwise fragmented experience. Shelley offers the most vigorous defense of poetry ever composed, seeing the art as the sum of all human activities. Poetry both creates “new materials of knowledge” and “engenders in the mind a desire to reproduce and arrange them according to a certain rhythm and order which

may be called the beautiful and the good." Poetry is "something divine," locating the "center and circumference of knowledge." Somewhat grandly, he refers to poets as "the unacknowledged legislators of mankind," a remark that has drawn endless derision over the years.

In nineteenth-century America, Emerson, Walt Whitman, and Emily Dickinson picked up on Shelley's theme in their very different ways, yet each saw poetry as central to the human enterprise. "The poet is the Namer, or Language-maker, naming things sometimes after their appearance, sometimes after their essence, and giving to every one its own name and not another's thereby rejoicing the intellect, which delights in the detachment or boundary," writes Emerson in "The Poet" (1844). "The poets made all the words, and therefore language is the archives of history, and, if we must say it, a sort of tomb of the muses. For, though the origin of most of our words is forgotten, each word was at first a stroke of genius, and obtained currency, because for the moment it symbolized the world to the first speaker and to the hearer. The etymologist finds the deadest word to have been once a brilliant picture. Language is fossil poetry." And so the work of the poet is to refresh the language itself, returning words to their pictorial origins. Emerson surveys the vast American continent and wonders where he might find a poet equal to this plenitude.<sup>13</sup>

Whitman found this poet in . . . Walt Whitman, celebrating himself as the spokesman for North America, if not the whole world, in *Song of Myself*, but also in his magnificent preface to *Leaves of Grass* (1855). In this latter work he argues that anyone can appreciate the natural world, but the poet must do more



than merely point to “the beauty and dignity which always attach to dumb real objects.” All men and women see this luxuriance, he maintains. But the poet, above others, must “indicate the path between reality and their souls.” It is in the articulation of spiritual lines between the human mind and the world of external reality that poets find their truest calling. Whitman concludes that “a great poem is for ages and ages in common and for all degrees and complexions and all departments and sects and for a woman as much as a man and a man as much as a woman. A great poem is no finish to a man or woman but rather a beginning.”<sup>14</sup>

In her delicate, strange poems, Emily Dickinson often considered the poet’s function in elevated terms. She left behind no elaborate defense of poetry in prose, although her mentor, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, recalled a comment that comes as close to a theory of poetry as anything we have by her: “If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way?” In poem 448, she writes: “This was a Poet—It is That / Distills amazing sense / From ordinary Meanings.”<sup>15</sup> And she placed great store by naming as well, by “saying” a poem, as in poem 1212:

A word is dead  
When it is said,  
Some say.  
I say it just  
Begins to live  
That day.

. . . . .

One finds endless variations on the above themes among the poets of the twentieth century. The idea that poets assimilate various elements and unify them was given memorable expression by Eliot in his essay on the Metaphysical poets: “When a poet’s mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man’s experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes.”<sup>16</sup>

Eliot saw the poet’s work as making connections to tradition, keeping it alive by constantly challenging and debating its contours. (See Chapter 5 for a full elaboration of this idea.) His poetry often reflects the spiritual crisis that came in the wake of the Great War, when sacred signs and symbols seemed devoid of meaning, “a heap of broken images.” In *The Waste Land*, he sifts through the remains of civilization to find those bits and pieces of literature that had meaning for him: “These fragments I have shored against my ruins.” In *Four Quartets*, his most exhilarating achievement (which I consider in detail in Chapter 9), he searches in Christian and Buddhist traditions to find “the still point of the turning world,” meditating in urgent ways on the power of art itself to create a sense of order.

Eliot believed that the work of the poet was to “purify the dialect of the tribe,” as he wrote in “Little Gidding,” echoing a well-known line in French by Stéphane Mallarmé. This purification, for Eliot, is an act of attention to language, a way of mak-

ing sure that it demonstrates an “easy commerce of the old and the new.” Language moves toward stillness, toward a centered life in which the eternal demands of the spirit pour into the details of everyday life, our temporal world. In a similar vein, Robert Frost writes that his whole project as a poet was about the “deeper and deeper penetration of spirit into matter.” Frost had his own version of the “still point” analogy, suggesting that poetry offered “a momentary stay against confusion.”<sup>17</sup>

Poets often talk about their hopes for poetry, in prose as well as in their poems. In “The Monument,” Elizabeth Bishop puts forward her view of art in a delicate fashion, suggesting that artworks, whether taking the shape of “a piece of sculpture, or poem, or monument,” all have in common their ability to “shelter / what is within.” And in her heartbreaking poem “One Art,” she writes about trying to contain within the poem the endless losses, little and large, that afflict a human being. The poem ends with an address to the poet herself, in which she (with bitter irony) observes that “the art of losing’s not too hard to master / though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster.” There is a certain residual faith in the art in that fierce parenthetical command: *Write it!*

Of all poets, Wallace Stevens was the most compulsive theorist of his own art. He could apparently think of nothing else but the use of poetry. The word itself for him stood in for nearly everything created by the human mind in response to the chaos of the world. In his lecture “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” delivered at Princeton in 1942, when the Second World War threatened to obliterate the globe, he talks about the con-

frontation between reality and the imagination that forms the basis of all his poems. He laments the fact that reality, after the Great War, “became so violent.” He refers to “the pressure of reality,” by which he means “life in a state of violence, not physically violent, as yet, for us in America, but physically violent for millions of our friends and for still more millions of our enemies and spiritually violent, it may be said, for everyone alive.”<sup>18</sup>

The pressure of reality is fierce, yet poetry supplies a counter-pressure, pushing back against this external pressure, seeking an equilibrium—“a pressure great enough and prolonged enough to bring about the end of one era in the history of imagination and, if so, then great enough to bring about the beginning of another.” He adds, “It is not that there is a new imagination but that there is a new reality”; indeed, “the pressure of reality is, I think, the determining factor in the artistic character of an era and, as well, the determining factor in the artistic character of an individual. The resistance to this pressure or its evasion in the case of individuals of extraordinary imagination cancels the pressure so far as those individuals are concerned.” In this, the poet’s role is simply “to help people live their lives.”

Poetry, therefore, assists readers subjected to violent realities by opening their minds to fresh ways of thinking. Most famously, Stevens defines poetry as “a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality. It seems, in the last analysis, to have something to do with our self-preservation; and that, no doubt, is why the expression of it, the sound of its words, helps us to live our lives.” And so we look for a language

that embodies and “pushes back” against the outside world. Without that force of expression, there is no comfort or stability, no means of coping with the surrounding destruction and fragmentation.

Poetry is by its very nature political, although it does not necessarily advocate one policy over another, side with a particular party, raise a fist in defiance, or hold a banner in a parade of protest. Poets may do all of the above, but in their poems they supply something that comes before the polemics: a sense of direction, a spiritual grounding, a place to stand where the pressure of reality will not overcome the imagination, thus limiting possibilities.

Many poets in our violent “postwar” era have responded to the devastation in their own measure and style. Among the best of these has been Adrienne Rich, who has battled the patriarchal culture as well as the war-mongering culture—if these can be separated. She has found a crucial “dynamic between a political vision and the demand for a fresh vision of literature.” She writes: “For a poem to coalesce, for a character or an action to take shape, there has to be an imaginative transformation of reality which is in no way passive.” The poet must actively confront reality, in fresh language. “If the imagination is to transcend and transform experience it has to question, to challenge, to conceive of alternatives, perhaps to the very life you are living at that moment. You have to be free to play around with the notion that day might be night, love might be hate; nothing can be too sacred for the imagination to turn into its opposite or to call experimentally by another name. For writing is renaming.”<sup>19</sup>

Poetry is certainly renaming of a kind, as Emerson observes in "The Poet." It is finding the words that connect past to present, thereby transforming the present reality from something intolerable to something one can live with, even love. The mind of the poet supplies a light to the minds of others, kindling their imaginations, helping them to live their lives. It is a confrontation, a counterpressure, an alternate world of reimagined language that informs the reality that is everywhere pressing and pulling, shouting and—in this day and age—exploding. Power, says Rich, is essential in the poet, in poetry itself; but this power "is not power of domination, but just access to sources." This means connecting readers to the history of language itself, to the history of human encounters with the violent realities that surround them, and to the history of human success in the struggle for spiritual survival. Most crucially, perhaps, poetry restores the culture to itself: mirroring what it finds there already but also sensing and embodying the higher purposes and buried ideals of that culture, granting access to hidden sources of power. Poets become, in George Oppen's twist on Shelley's famous line, "the legislators of the unacknowledged world," naming things previously unnamed, what is hidden or buried, what lies beneath the culture but nevertheless plays a huge role in shaping its sense of itself.<sup>20</sup>

Nobody, not even Plato, would toss out of the ideal republic the poet who could deliver on these promises. The wonder is that so many of them have indeed delivered.