

## Poetry and Pleasure

In my teens, I memorized the following poem, without trying to memorize it, and without much thought for its meaning:

### ON BEING ASKED FOR A WAR POEM

I think it better that in times like these  
A poet's mouth be silent, for in truth  
We have no gift to set a statesman right;  
He has had enough of meddling who can please  
A young girl in the indolence of her youth,  
Or an old man upon a winter's night.

I think that what I liked about the poem was physical. That is, it had to do with what I could feel the consonants and vowels doing inside my mouth and in my ear.

About five years after I first read the poem, a teacher—a great teacher—upset me by criticizing the poem for its sentimental and anti-intellectual view of the nature of poetry. My teacher said that while one could not object to Yeats's refusing to write a poem to order on war or on any set subject, the reason Yeats gives is feeble, assigning poetry a trivial status:

[to] please  
A young girl in the indolence of her youth,  
Or an old man upon a winter's night.

This criticism, powerful and perhaps irrefutable though it is, ignores the historical attitude toward World War I of an Irish poet who a few years later would write "Easter 1916." It also ignores a loyalty

A "craft lecture" to the Berkeley Poetry Conference, July 1981.

I have never been able to shake off, toward the idea of pleasing and being pleased in works of art. Is my desire to make something capable of giving surprise, or giving a sensation of elegance, or a feeling of attraction—my desire to make something *pleasing*—simply a petty or irresponsible aspect of my strivings to make a work of art?

I think that the passion to give the gift of pleasure and interest, the desire to make this gift available (in theory) even to someone distracted by the body's sexual restlessness, or the body's need for comfort in cold weather, is an impersonal desire; Yeats's old man and young woman are not at a poetry reading, they are not book reviewers, he is not talking about their *response*, their compliments or their fan letters. He is talking about the idea of pleasing and interesting them, against odds, and without his even knowing it at the time. Though the poem may be subject to copyright law, and printed in a book that costs money, and though the concert and the museum too may cost money, there is another sense in which a work of art is a gift, a gift of pleasure which some of us aspire to give. (I borrow this idea from Lewis Hyde.)

Secondly, I want to say—as humbly as possible—that despite all the complexities of literary theory, for all the ingenuities of ambition or expectation, the trouble with most poems that fail—one's own poems, or poems written in workshops, or submitted to magazines, or published in books—may be described simply: they are not interesting enough to impart conviction. Most of them fail to be surprising or musical or revealing enough to arouse much interest; to read them, one must be a professional (and certainly not an indolent or drowsy professional). It sounds silly to say so, but some explicit sex, or a few jokes, or a bizarre personal confession, might make these poems more interesting. (It is true that such ingredients would not make them good poems; that is another reminder of how difficult it is to make a good poem.)

What we mean by feeling "interest," I think, is the free acceptance of the gift of pleasure. Without this component, however important the material in a work of art may be, or sophisticated its technique, we are responding with mere piety, or mere astonishment.

But is it possible to talk about how to be interesting, without

sounding foolish? I will start with some rough categories for the kinds of interest I find in poems I love, and then cite some examples.

Poems, after all, are not the only compositions in words. Although poems are the most interesting kind of such composition to me, I can think of at least three others that please and interest most people, each having something in common with poems: songs, jokes and personal letters, which embody for me respectively the qualities of physical grace, lively social texture and inward revelation. Since good poems often have all three qualities, the examples I choose will be essentially arbitrary; in fact, I choose them partly to underscore the arbitrariness.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, poets wrote poems that have, to an amazingly pure degree, the interest of physical grace, the counterpoint of their music and their sentences. The physical transformation of words, simply by their arrangement, into something that approaches actual song, often gives an unexpected life, dignity and penetration to unpromising, formulaic subjects. Here is Ben Jonson singing the mating-song of an older lover, making his embarrassment about himself and his exaggerated appreciation of the person he loves into something that pleases me and cheers me up every time I read it:

Let it not your wonder move,  
 Less your laughter, that I love.  
 Though I now write fifty years  
 I have had, and have my peers;  
 Poets, though divine, are men:  
 Some have loved as old again.  
 And it is not always Face,  
 Clothes, or Fortune gives the grace;  
 Or the feature, or the youth:  
 But the Language, and the Truth,  
 With the Ardor and the Passion,  
 Gives the Lover weight, and fashion.  
 If you then will read the Storie,  
 First, prepare you to be Sorie  
 That you never knew till now  
 Either whom to love, or how:

But be glad, as soon with me,  
 When you know that this is she  
 Of whose beauty it was sung  
 She shall make the old man young,  
 Keep the middle age at stay,  
 And let nothing high decay  
 Till she be the reason why  
 All the world for love may die.

In a way, my point is that all good art defeats the predictable; Jonson defeats it with and through music: *with* music, for instance, in the way the most sing-song of all English meters is made fluent and personal and various by such means as his placement of the pause-within-the-line—now late in the line, now early:

Let it not your wonder move,  
 Less your laughter      that I love.  
 Though I now write fifty years,  
 I have had      and have my peers.  
 . . . . .  
 If you then will read the Storie,  
 First      prepare you to be Sorie  
 That you never knew till now  
 Either whom to love      or how.

But Jonson also defeats the predictable *through* music, because the elements that delight us appear to grow out of the swelling sense that he *will* sing, even though expectation and age threaten to hold him back. This resolve to sing keeps getting fuller and stronger: from the wry opening lines about faces, clothes, fortunes, then to the rhapsody about language, truth, ardor, passion, and finally on to the apotheosis of the beauty, and the appearance of the verb “to sing” itself—

Of whose beauty it was sung  
 She shall make the old man young,

—that follows; it is an elevated, victorious version of the opening lines in which the old lover protests that really, he is young. But who could predict:



Keep the middle age at stay,

Or, even more fresh and venturesome:

And let nothing high decay  
Till she be the reason why  
All the world for love may die.

That is, the traditional Petrarchan love-language of dying for the personification of Beauty, seemingly immortal, is taken over for the old lover's own purpose: both dying for love and being kept fresh by it are epitomized by him.

Jonson's poem, then, pleases and interests because it is inventively beautiful in sound, and because its beauty dramatizes the poem's proposition that art can make fresh and heartening what would otherwise be drab and discouraging. Though form has been looked on sometimes as the most public, least personal part of poetry, here form is an individual, physical expression of impatience with the clumsy boundary of what is expected.

As a physical expression, in other words, the attractive form of Jonson's poem is personal, the way one's way of dancing or gesturing or walking is personal. Insofar as this is true, Jonson's achievement of a personal expressive rhythm, within a confining but distinctly forceful meter, is horribly enviable for anyone who has tried to put sensuous life and individual force into metered or unmetered lines.

Part of the effect is not simply metrical, but springs from the freshness and naturalness of idiom: "though I now write fifty years"; "poets, though divine, are men"; "it is not always Face, Clothes, or Fortune"; "you never knew till now"; "be glad"; "this is she." These phrases are Jonson's plain English, as fresh in their historical context as the plain American of Williams, and when they coincide with the measure there is the thrill of sensing that the rhythmic demands of song and the nature of actual speech have been made to coincide, as when a song's pattern and song-lyrics seem made for one another.

Finally, it's worth observing that the particular pattern of Jonson's poem seems especially well suited to the theme that skill can elevate and transform an old, inert, provincial or discouraged body. The pattern is "beheaded" tetrameter, which by dropping the first,

unstressed syllable that begins a normal tetrameter line emphasizes the separation of the lines, most of them beginning, as well as ordinarily ending, with a stressed syllable. Then, with a feeling of exuberant transformation, the poet glides things back together by flowing the grammar over that separation; Jonson's last lines might have inspired Yeats in "Under Ben Bulbin":

Irish poets, learn your trade,  
Sing whatever is well made,  
Scorn the sort now growing up  
All out of shape from toe to top.

The note of exultation and scorn—in Jonson's lines, scorn for those who put the body above the arts that animate it, in Yeats's lines, scorn for those who fail to master those arts—in both poems resolves itself into a note of triumph. The sense of victory, of overcoming the shapelessness or fatigue of the body, is near the center of the pleasure of song. By fitting the grunts and vocalizations of language into elegant, expressive patterns, poetry conveys a similar pleasure in the human body as it apparently excels itself.

As to jokes, it is not their funniness that interests me in relation to poetry, nor is it their structure, which is the aspect of jokes most often taken up when speaking of poetry (as when a Shakespeare sonnet is said to rely too much upon the weak punch line of its couplet). To make it clear that I am not talking about jokelike, funny elements in poems I will try to pick a fairly solemn poem, with no particular punch-line structure, for an example of the principles I do have in mind. These principles concern the alert social texture of successful jokes, and in relation to that texture their sense of context and power to generate context.

I think that the idea of "good jokes" and "bad" ones reflects a misconception; the timing and social placement of the joke, and the textural pleasures of its telling, matter far more than the mechanical burning of a narrative fuse toward the little explosion of a punch line. The joke about the one-armed piccolo player might be right for a certain moment after a picnic, but not for the car-ride home. Or the badness or bad taste of one joke might sometimes be more successful than the seeming excellence of another. People naive



about jokes fail to see this enormously social, contextual limitation to the form, and are bewildered when the Jewish parrot joke that caused tears in one setting evokes only polite smiles in a slightly different one; moreover, such a teller exaggerates the importance of "how" it was told, while underestimating the original teller's sense of precisely when to time the joke.

Also, charm of texture probably matters more, compared to punch lines, than rhetorically naive conceptions of the joke assume: the way the woman who told the parrot joke hunched her shoulders and used head, rather than arm, gestures to suggest the parrot pointing out the *talis* it would like the tailor to copy for it in miniature; the way the woman pronounces or mispronounces *talis*; the way the tailor is presented as mixing the teller's idiom ludicrously with the ethnic idiom—touches like these, as they establish context and conviction, make up the living body of a tiny work of art, for which the punch line is merely the graceful closure. These touches are the expressive social gestures which in a poem we sometimes call "taste" or "timing" or "tact" or "wit."

I am afraid that I'll seem to be diddling with superficial matters that insult the serious and vital art of poetry; but I am trying to edge toward the altar of the mystery, by analogy—and the fleeting, social conviction and alertness that come to life when one person contrives a funny story for others resemble one aspect of the more enduring, freestanding conviction of the successful gift that is a poem. Moreover, this aspect of poems seems to me to be the one that criticism sees least clearly, and is most likely to mangle or bungle inadvertently.

If music conveys physical grace, this contextual alertness conveys a feeling of actual life at its best, of social liveliness. In the joke this liveliness is ephemeral and contingent. In the poem, it is the enduring generosity and subtlety of a human presence:

#### PIANO

Softly, in the dusk, a woman is singing to me;  
Taking me back down the vista of years, till I see  
A child sitting under the piano, in the boom of the tingling strings  
And pressing the small, poised feet of a mother who smiles as  
she sings.

In spite of myself, the insidious mastery of song  
Betrays me back, till the heart of me weeps to belong  
To the old Sunday evenings at home, with winter outside  
And hymns in the cozy parlor, the tinkling piano our guide.

So now it is vain for the singer to burst into clamour  
With the great black piano appassionato. The glamour  
Of childish days is upon me, my manhood is cast  
Down in the flood of remembrance, I weep like a child for the past.

D. H. Lawrence modulates the presence of the human voice telling this poem, whose subject—boy versus man, nostalgia versus passion, music versus thought, "manhood" versus "softness," remembrance versus the present, the human voice versus its accompanying "great black piano" of feeling—is a stock source for poems, as mothers-in-law or airplanes with ethnically various passengers are stock sources for jokes. The modulation of the personal presence in the poem is the source of its formal invention, its ability to pierce us with something fresh, and not stock.

At the very beginning, the conventional "Softly, in the dusk" and "Taking me back" tell us where we are, in the way that in the joke form "a man goes to a doctor" or "a guy goes into a bar and says" tell us where we are. The quasi-social convention tells us that "child" denotes the same person as the adult who is being sung to, and the vivid, nonconventional language—

A child sitting under the piano, in the boom of the tingling strings  
And pressing the small, poised feet of a mother who smiles as  
she sings.

—tells us that the energy is going to be in the past: the softness of the dusk in the present, and the "boom of the tingling strings" in the past. And though the "insidious mastery of song" is in the present, it "betrays [him] back" to the past. The words "insidious" and "betrays" put a steely spring into the social component of the poem, the amazing spring of Lawrence's combative, moralistic side.

In relation to the social component of the poem, I want to return to the idea of tact, or social judgment. There are two large ways



in which the poem seems related to society: sexually, there is a feeling made out of the Oedipal situation of the child, the infantilizing impact this has on the man, and the suggestion of male impotence; politically, the "cozy parlor" and the Sunday evening hymns place the memory in a certain religious, cultural and social strand of English life. But how pathetically wooden and imprecise my summarizing language is for the actual, pleasingly deft accuracy with which Lawrence's poem indicates these parts of what he has to say, including the contrast between the Baptist family home of the child and the elegant situation of the grown man. My lament at the clumsiness of my own definition, here, is a standard critical maneuver; but I think that criticism, despite such outward laments, tends to neglect the way that such matters of nuance and degree are not merely difficulties presented to the professional reader, and not even mere beauties of technique that make the work of art more to be prized; rather, the ability to introduce feelings and meanings to precise degrees, with compact, rapid accuracy, is at the core of the work of art. Such calibrations embody the way a work of art struggles for a claim on our attention. I think that this power is in a way a social grace or art—like the ability to time and present a funny story. (Needless to say, the sexual or sociopolitical matters at stake here may be considerably more demanding than the contexts I suggested above for the joke.)

But as poets (rather than readers) our concerns are different. One problem we may have in writing a poem is how to arrange and dispose a feeling—how to put something first, something else second, and so forth. The silliest joke, too, must solve this problem. Lawrence solves the problem in terms of a kind of narrative combat, I have suggested, between resistance and nostalgia, present and past, soft language and hard. In a joke, the comparable elements might be the ordinary and the preposterous, as in the countless stories in which a man goes into a bar with a polar bear, or a horse, or an invisible dwarf, or a mermaid. The skill (or art, if we choose) of presenting the joke is in presenting the dance or tension of the two elements, ordinary and bizarre. In Lawrence's poem, the dance or struggle I have indicated is dramatized by the rhyming, personal voice telling what happens, as it includes the opposed meanings of "cozy" and "insidious," the opposed roots and social contexts of

those words, and the opposed social analogues of the rhetorical "great black piano appassionato" and the bare, plain "weep like a child":

In spite of myself, the insidious mastery of song  
Betrays me back, till the heart of me weeps to belong  
To the old Sunday evenings at home, with winter outside  
And hymns in the cozy parlor, the tinkling piano our guide.

So now it is vain for the singer to burst into clamour  
With the great black piano appassionato. The glamour  
Of childish days is upon me, my manhood is cast  
Down in the flood of remembrance, I weep like a child for the past.

There is something like wit—not mere wittiness, but social wit, an alert brilliance about tone, that calls up our own delight in nuance, our delight in not being stupid or bored—in the "glamour of childish days," the singer in clamor and the great black piano appassionato, piano and singer impotent to compete with the tear-flooded past they have called up. That language has literary and sexual implications—"glamour" and "childish" and "manhood cast down"—touched on so surely and unheavyhandedly that we are flattered, or anyway invited along pleasingly. The same can be said of the way "the old Sunday evenings at home" and "the heart of me weeps to belong" evoke, without mocking, a lower-middle-class elegance of speech.

If the poem's structure has anything like a punch line or final revelation, it is syntactical: after sentences and parts of sentences all beginning with modifiers, the last sentence links three strong substantive subjects that begin its three clauses—"glamour," "manhood," "I":

the glamour  
Of childish days is upon me, my manhood is cast  
Down in the flood of remembrance, I weep like a child for the past.

We are given this by the teller to appreciate, like a sudden colloquialism or gesture by one telling a joke, and I think we appreciate it



partly for the way he has created a social context for us and exploited that context. In other words, the three strong substantives please the reader not just formally, but as the capstone of a plot, involving the sexual and socio-economic matters I have (a bit ponderously) outlined. We respond to this social grace and penetration, or rather to this artistic imitation of social grace and penetration, with the pleasure of being taken out of ourselves, and yet also further into ourselves.

Finally, putting Lawrence's poem aside, I want to say again that I am not talking about the narrative element in jokes and poems, but about something communal in the art of presentation. Since I can't show you someone telling a joke, cast your mind to the Gable character and the Colbert character in *It Happened One Night*, when early in their flirtation, in order to fool some detectives, they improvise an argument in which they pretend to be a rather stupid married couple screaming at one another. It is a little work of art the two characters have made, and given to one another, and it is based on social understanding and imagination; and it functions—far more importantly than fooling detectives—to advance their sexual trust and respect. When Lawrence invites us to hear conventional and fresh language, coziness and insidiousness, when he has the child “press” rather than, say, “touch” the mother's feet—he is inviting us to take a pleasure like that of the two characters, based on a similar part of our intelligence, a similar wish to appreciate other people and their sense of themselves in their words.

If music's grace is the most basic aspect of a poem's appeal, and lively contextual sense is a poem's necessary social component, perhaps the most profound pleasure by which a poem engages our interest is by revealing to us the inward motion of another mind and soul. I associate this power with letters because I have found it impossible to write a good personal letter without going at least a little further into myself than I might in conversation; the element of planning or composition seems to strip away barriers, props and disguises, rather than to create them. I think we all find this true in letters from friends—even the brief hurried note seems to have concentrated some distillate of a person's inner nature. And to read an old letter of one's own is, sometimes, to be amazed at how

revelatory the mix of news, musing, inquiry turns out to be. And as surely as the abstract yet physical course of music pleases us, or the skillful weave of telling in a social context pleases us, the revelation of an inward self pleases us.

One poet above all others has trusted this principle, has ruthlessly followed the assumption that what is in him, if he can only follow its tides and creatures as faithfully as a naturalist, will be beautiful and interesting. In this, I find Whitman to be just as he says he is, however calculating and programmatic he may be in other ways. His amazing poem “Spontaneous Me,” for instance, presents a kind of deliberate sexual manifesto, with details far more pointed than what the poem calls “the negligent list of one after another as I happen to call them to me or think of them”; but on the other hand this alleged “negligence” is an accurate reflection of the poem's charm and force, which come from opening a kind of door into Walt. The idea of linking sexual energy and poetry, carried to absurd or sexist or self-important extremes, takes on the integrity that belongs to any actual single personality:

The real poems (what we call poems being merely pictures,)  
The poems of the privacy of night, and of men like me,  
This poem drooping shy and unseen that I always carry, and  
that all men carry.

The self-consciousness of the letter-writer, who is naked in the sense that he is stripped of the cloaking effects supplied by physical presence, social presence, often leads the writer to comment, as Whitman does here, on what he is writing.

But this self-reflection is perhaps more external, less revealing, than the series of set-pieces or rhetorical ebulliences that succeed it. And most revealing of all is the movement from one rhetorical flourish to the next. The letter-writer types in apparently random order a series of paragraphs, news, inquiry, anecdotes, asides, complaints, boasts, apologies; and as a whole, the plot created by the paragraphs reflects the characteristic energy by which the writer's personality moves. And as “Spontaneous Me” moves from the hilariously pornographic encounter between “the hairy wild bee” and the “full-grown lady flower” whom he grips with “amorous



firm legs" as he "hankers up and down" and "takes his will of her," on to the wet woods, then to the two sleepers "one with an arm slanting down across and below the waist of the other," then hastily to the "smell of apples" and sage, and so forth, leaping with a slightly nervous, elated grin from the erotic to the innocent, the generalized to the personal—the balletic jumps come to seem even more important and heartfelt than the places they touch.

Of course, these inventive loops and plunges and changes of manner are partly a technical feat, alert to what the reader will demand once the title "Spontaneous Me" has been linked to the sexual material. The poem surprises by going on, and then on, and varying catalogue against tender description, alternating shouted lists and whispered descriptions. But leaving technical considerations aside, consider the beautiful passage on masturbation, and the sequence that follows it:

The limpid liquid within the young man,  
 The vex'd corrosion so pensive and so painful,  
 The torment, the irritable tide that will not be at rest,  
 The like of the same I feel, the like of the same in others,  
 The young man that flushes and flushes, and the young woman  
     that flushes and flushes,  
 The young man that wakes deep at night, the hot hand seeking to  
     repress what would master him,  
 The mystic amorous night, the strange half-welcome pangs, visions,  
     sweats,  
 The pulse pounding through palms and trembling encircling  
     fingers, the young man all color'd, red, ashamed, angry;  
 The souse upon me of my lover the sea, as I lie willing and naked,  
 The merriment of twin babes that crawl over the grass in the sun,  
     the mother never turning her vigilant eyes from them,  
 The walnut trunk, the walnut husks, and the ripening or ripen'd  
     long-round walnuts,  
 The continence of vegetables, birds, animals,  
 The consequent meanness of me should I skulk or find myself  
     indecent, while birds and animals never once skulk or  
     find themselves indecent.

The last five lines embody what I mean by the revelation of self through movement from one thing to the next. On the one hand,

on the surface, they present a Whitmanian doctrine about the innocence of sexuality, with the line where he lies willing and naked under the souse of his lover the sea at the fulcrum. (That line is the most daringly explicit in one way, and draws a seemly veil of "the natural" over things, in another way.) On the other hand, the working out in texture of the "red, ashamed, angry" youth, to the souse of the sea, to the twin babes is full of invention and peculiarity; we can feel his affected, excessive, unerring brain stretching for inspired examples and finding them. This seems particularly true of the mother "never turning her vigilant eyes" from the twin babes—a Victorian contrivance of sweetness that is also the maternal poet (or reader) refusing to avert watchful eyes from what two people may like to do together. And then walnuts, of all things, and of all the attributes of birds, animals and vegetables (!), their "continence." The odd little association of sound between that word and "consequence" is part of the persuasive psychological fabric. It helps make the poem seem the easy going-into oneself of

Beautiful dripping fragments, the negligent list of  
 one after another as I happen to call them to me  
 or think of them,

while the sequence of examples for innocence and passion, anxious to persuade and calm the reader, reminds us how planned and determined the poem is. This dual sense of a freed, wandering mind in the writer and his extreme consciousness of the reader, the combination of nakedness and a rather specific awareness of audience, gives Whitman's structure its energy, more than selfhood or doctrine could do alone. The subtlety of this movement, more free than conversation and yet more contrived, less formal than discursive prose and yet more concentrated, resembles the best kind of letter.

What impresses me about the Whitman poem—about all of the poems I have discussed—is the fact that its essential appeal cannot be attributed to the way it fulfills certain (undeniably valuable) standards that pervade creative writing or literary criticism, as they approach poetry. Vivid phrases; striking images; sharp physical details; beautiful, quotable language; important ideas (philosophical, political, psychological): no one could deny that these elements are important, and that they contribute to our desire to read Whitman's



poem, Lawrence's, Jonson's, our pleasurable assent to *be* reading them. But if gorgeous, impressive language and profound, crucial ideas were all that poetry offered to engage us, would it seem—as it does to many of us—as necessary as food? Would eloquence and truth, by themselves, be enough to compete with (say) the movies, for our attention?

As I re-read the passage in "Spontaneous Me" about masturbation, shame, innocence, exuberance, pleasure, freedom, identity, and search in it for the three qualities I have tried to consider as essential, I find them at the center of the charm and passionate engagement I find in the passage. In the sounds of a line (the rapid beginning and slow ending of the phrase "merriment of twin babes," the consonants in "merriment" and "twin"; the consonants and vowels in "grass," "crawl," "mother," "never," "vigilant") there is something comparable to the tune you hear and want to hum, and hum again. In the teasing alternation of preacherly and pornographic phrases, there is something comparable to the bright, socially observant talker's sense of audience and social context, evoking, mocking and confessing to the prudery and lasciviousness of his time and place. And in the way the structure, avowedly random and ostensibly determined by its political and psychological ideas, conveys the moral drama of Whitman's mind as it moves through its examples and assertions, there is something comparable to the pleasure given by a letter taken out to be read again, because it embodies a considerable soul in action.

This movement—physical in the sounds of a poem, moral in its relation to the society implied by language, and the person who utters the poem—is near the heart of poetry's mysterious appeal, for me. Such movement cannot be affected or faked. It comes from conviction: confidence in the power of rhythm; trust in the social generosity between artist and audience; belief in the movement of one's own thoughts and feelings. Convincing movement is what commands interest. (Boredom appears to be a response to the tunelessness, timidity or weak faith that are in the work of art, a sense that the soul is standing still.)

I'd like to close with a poem that seems to me to present such movement in a rather naked form, Czeslaw Milosz's "Incantation." It is also a very encouraging poem on the subject of poetry. Rather

than apologize for the fact that it is a translation, I'll suggest that it all the more presents the essential movement or conviction I'm trying to get at, and all the more may risk violating standards of poetry we may take from the terms of creative writing or book reviews. With those terms uppermost in our mind, would we have the boldness to write the first line of this poem? Its first three lines, or its first six?

#### INCANTATION

Human reason is beautiful and invincible.  
 No bars, no barbed wire, no pulping of books,  
 No sentence of banishment can prevail against it.  
 It establishes the universal ideas in language,  
 And guides our hand so we write Truth and Justice  
 With capital letters, lie and oppression with small.  
 It puts what should be above things as they are,  
 Is an enemy of despair and a friend of hope.  
 It does not know Jew from Greek or slave from master,  
 Giving us the estate of the world to manage.  
 It saves austere and transparent phrases  
 From the filthy discord of tortured words.  
 It says that everything is new under the sun,  
 Opens the congealed fist of the past.  
 Beautiful and very young are Philo-Sophia  
 And poetry, her ally in the service of the good.  
 As late as yesterday Nature celebrated their birth,  
 The news was brought to the mountains by a unicorn and an echo.  
 Their friendship will be glorious, their time has no limit.  
 Their enemies have delivered themselves to destruction.

It is good to read a poem that suggests that poems are supremely important, and that many good poems remain to be written. The art, says Milosz, is young; and it is the friend of truth. That is, it promises surprises far beyond the clichés of fine writing or self-regard, with the appeal neither of an easy cosmetic rhetoric nor of a secret code that ignores the reader and the world; it promises vital, unsuppressible knowledge. The creation of interest through the most pleasurable ways of knowing: that is what poetry—the fasci-



nating, more physically graceful friend of Philo-Sophia—is. Or anyway, by entertaining such a definition of poetry, as the creation of an interest in truth through pleasure, Yeats's poem about the ambition to please may be a little redeemed.

From Sadness & Happiness  
(1975)

*Essay On Psychiatrists*

I. Invocation

It's crazy to think one could describe them—  
Calling on reason, fantasy, memory, eyes and ears—  
As though they were all alike any more

Than sweeps, opticians, poets or masseurs.  
Moreover, they are for more than one reason  
Difficult to speak of seriously and freely,

And I have never (even this is difficult to say  
Plainly, without foolishness or irony)  
Consulted one for professional help, though it happens

Many or most of my friends have—and that,  
Perhaps, is why it seems urgent to try to speak  
Sensibly about them, about the psychiatrists.

II. Some Terms

"Shrink" is a misnomer. The religious  
Analogy is all wrong, too, and the old,  
Half-forgotten jokes about Viennese accents

And beards hardly apply to the good-looking woman  
In boots and a knit dress, or the man  
Seen buying the *Sunday Times* in mutton-chop

Whiskers and expensive jogging shoes.  
In a way I suspect that even the terms "doctor"  
And "therapist" are misnomers; the patient

Is not necessarily "sick." And one assumes  
That no small part of the psychiatrist's  
Role is just that: to point out misnomers.



### III. Proposition

These are the first citizens of contingency.  
Far from the doctrinaire past of the old ones,  
They think in their prudent meditations

Not about ecstasy (the soul leaving the body)  
Nor enthusiasm (the god entering one's person)  
Nor even about sanity (which means

Health, an impossible perfection)  
But ponder instead relative truth and the warm  
Dusk of amelioration. The cautious

Young augurs with their family-life, good books  
And records and foreign cars believe  
In amelioration—in that, and in suffering.

### IV. A Lakeside Identification

Yes, crazy to suppose one could describe them—  
And yet, there was this incident: at the local beach  
Clouds of professors and the husbands of professors

Swam, dabbled or stood to talk with arms folded  
Gazing at the lake . . . and one of the few townsfolk there,  
With no faculty status—a matter-of-fact, competent,

Catholic woman of twenty-seven with five children  
And a first-rate body—pointed her finger  
At the back of one certain man and asked me,

"Is that guy a psychiatrist?" and by god he was! "Yes,"  
She said, "He *looks* like a psychiatrist."  
Grown quiet, I looked at his pink back, and thought.

### V. Physical Comparison With Professors And Others

Pink and a bit soft-bodied, with a somewhat jazzy  
Middle-class bathing suit and sandy sideburns, to me  
He looked from the back like one more professor.

And from the front, too—the boyish, unformed carriage  
Which foreigners always note in American men, combined  
As in a professor with that liberal, quizzical,

Articulate gaze so unlike the more focused, more  
Tolerant expression worn by a man of action (surgeon,  
Salesman, athlete). On closer inspection was there,

Perhaps, a self-satisfied or benign air, a studied  
Gentleness toward the child whose hand he held loosely?  
Absurd to speculate; but then—the woman saw *something*.

### VI. Their Seriousness, With Further Comparisons

In a certain sense, they are not serious.  
That is, they are serious—useful, deeply helpful,  
Concerned—only in the way that the pilots of huge

Planes, radiologists, and master mechanics can,  
At their best, be serious. But however profound  
The psychiatrists may be, they are not serious the way

A painter may be serious beyond pictures, or a businessman  
May be serious beyond property and cash—or even  
The way scholars and surgeons are serious, each rapt

In his work's final cause, contingent upon nothing:  
Beyond work; persons; recoveries. (And this is fitting:  
Who would want to fly with a pilot who was *serious*

About getting to the destination safely? Terrifying idea—  
That a pilot could over-extend, perhaps try to fly  
Too well, or suffer from Pilot's Block; of course,

It may be that (just as they must not drink liquor  
Before a flight) they undergo regular, required check-ups  
With a psychiatrist, to prevent such things from happening.

## VII. Historical (*The Bacchae*)

Madness itself, as an idea, leaves us confused—  
Incredulous that it exists, or cruelly facetious,  
Or stricken with a superstitious awe as if bound

By the lost cults of Trebizond and Pergamum . . .  
The most profound study of madness is found  
In the *Bacchae* of Euripides, so deeply disturbing

That in Cambridge, Massachusetts the players  
Evaded some of the strongest unsettling material  
By portraying poor sincere, fuddled, decent Pentheus

As a sort of fascistic bureaucrat—but it is Dionysus  
Who holds rallies, instills exaltations of violence,  
With his leopards and atavistic troops above law,

Reason and the good sense and reflective dignity  
Of Pentheus—Pentheus, humiliated, addled, made to suffer  
Atrocity as a minor jest of the smirking God.

When Bacchus's Chorus (who call him "most gentle"!)  
observe:

"Ten thousand men have ten thousand hopes; some fail,  
Some come to fruit, but the happiest man is he

Who gathers the good of life day by day"—as though  
Life itself were enough—does that mean, to leave ambition?  
And is it a kind of therapy, or truth? Or both?

## VIII. A Question

On the subject of madness the *Bacchae* seems,  
On the whole, more *pro* than *contra*. The Chorus  
Says of wine, "There is no other medicine for misery";

When the Queen in her ecstasy—or her enthusiasm?—  
Tears her terrified son's arm from his body, or bears  
His head on her spear, she remains happy so long

As she remains crazy; the God himself (who bound fawnskin  
To the women's flesh, armed them with ivy arrows  
And his orgies' livery) debases poor Pentheus first,

Then leads him to mince capering towards female Death  
And dismemberment: flushed, grinning, the grave young  
King of Thebes pulls at a slipping bra-strap, simpers

Down at his turned ankle. *Pentheus*: "Should I lift up  
Mount Cithæron—Bacchae, mother and all?"  
*Dionysus*: "Do what you want to do. Your mind

Was unstable once, but now you sound more sane,  
You are on your way to great things." The question is,  
Which is the psychiatrist: Pentheus, or Dionysus?

## IX. Pentheus As Psychiatrist

With his reasonable questions Pentheus tries  
To throw light on the old customs of savagery.  
Like a brave doctor, he asks about it all,

He hears everything, "Weird, fantastic things"  
The Messenger calls them: with their breasts  
Swollen, their new babies abandoned, mothers

Among the Bacchantes nestled gazelles  
And young wolves in their arms, and suckled them;  
You might see a single one of them tear a fat calf

In two, still bellowing with fright, while others  
Clawed heifers to pieces; ribs and hooves  
Were strewn everywhere; blood-smeared scraps

Hung from the fir trees; furious bulls  
Charged and then fell stumbling, pulled down  
To be stripped of skin and flesh by screaming women . . .



And Pentheus listened. Flames burned in their hair,  
Unnoticed; thick honey spurted from their wands;  
And the snakes they wore like ribbons licked

Hot blood from their flushed necks: Pentheus  
Was the man the people told . . . "weird things," like  
A middle-class fantasy of release; and when even

The old men—bent Cadmus and Tiresias—dress up  
In fawnskin and ivy, beating their wands on the ground,  
Trying to carouse, it is Pentheus—down-to-earth,

Sober—who raises his voice in the name of dignity.  
Being a psychiatrist, how could he attend to the Chorus's  
warning  
Against "those who aspire" and "a tongue without reins"?

#### X. Dionysus As Psychiatrist

In a more hostile view, the psychiatrists  
Are like Bacchus—the knowing smirk of his mask,  
His patients, his confident guidance of passion,

And even his little jokes, as when the great palace  
Is hit by lightning which blazes and stays,  
Bouncing among the crumpling stone walls . . .

And through the burning rubble he comes,  
With his soft ways picking along lightly  
With a calm smile for the trembling Chorus

Who have fallen to the ground, bowing  
In the un-Greek, Eastern way—What, Asian women,  
He asks, Were you disturbed just now when Bacchus

Jostled the palace? He warns Pentheus to adjust,  
To learn the ordinary man's humble sense of limits,  
Violent limits, to the rational world. He cures

Pentheus of the grand delusion that the dark  
Urgencies can be governed simply by the mind,  
And the mind's will. He teaches Queen Agave to look

Up from her loom, up at the light, at her tall  
Son's head impaled on the stiff spear clutched  
In her own hand soiled with dirt and blood.

#### XI. Their Philistinism Considered

"Greek Tragedy" of course is the sort of thing  
They like and like the idea of . . . though not "tragedy"  
In the sense of newspapers. When a patient shot one of  
them,

People phoned in, many upset as though a deep,  
Special rule had been abrogated, someone had gone too far.  
The poor doctor, as described by the evening *Globe*,

Turned out to be a decent, conventional man (Doctors  
For Peace, B'Nai Brith, numerous articles), almost  
Carefully so, like Paul Valéry—or like Rex Morgan, M.D.,  
who,

In the same *Globe*, attends a concert with a longjawed  
woman.

First Panel: "*We're a little early for the concert!*  
*There's an art museum we can stroll through!*" "*I'd like*

*That, Dr. Morgan!*" Second Panel: "*Outside the hospital,*  
*There's no need for such formality, Karen! Call me*  
*By my first name!*" "*I'll feel a little awkward!*"

Final Panel: "*Meanwhile . . .*" a black car pulls up  
To City Hospital. . . . By the next day's *Globe*, the real  
Doctor has died of gunshot wounds, while for smiling,  
wooden,

Masklike Rex and his companion the concert has passed,  
Painlessly, offstage: "*This was a beautiful experience,*  
*Rex!*"

*"I'm glad you enjoyed it! I have season tickets*

*And you're welcome to use them! I don't have  
The opportunity to go to many of the concerts!"*

Second Panel: "*You must be famished!*" And so Rex

And Karen go off to smile over a meal which will pass  
Like music offstage, off to the mysterious pathos  
Of their exclamation-marks, while in the final panel

*"Meanwhile, In The Lobby At City Hospital"*  
A longjawed man paces furiously among  
The lamps, magazines, tables and tubular chairs.

#### XII. Their Philistinism Dismissed

But after all—what "cultural life" and what  
Furniture, what set of the face, would seem adequate  
For those who supply medicine for misery?

After all, what they do is in a way a kind of art,  
And what writers have to say about music, or painters'  
Views about poetry, musicians' taste in pictures, all

Often are similarly hoked-up, dutiful, vulgar. After all,  
They are not gods or heroes, nor even priests chosen  
Apart from their own powers, but like artists are mere

Experts dependent on their own wisdom, their own arts:  
Pilgrims in the world, journeymen, bourgeois savants,  
Gallant seekers and persistent sons, doomed

To their cruel furniture and their season tickets  
As to skimmed meditations and waxen odes.  
At first, Rex Morgan seems a perfect Pentheus—

But he smirks, he is imperturbable, he understates;  
Understatement is the privilege of a god, we must  
Choose, we must find out which way to see them:

Either the bland arrogance of the abrupt mountain god  
Or the man of the town doing his best, we must not  
Complain both that they are inhuman and too human.

#### XIII. Their Despair

I am quite sure that I have read somewhere  
That the rate of suicide among psychiatrists  
Is far higher than for any other profession.

There are many myths to explain such things, things  
Which one reads and believes without believing  
Any one significance for them—as in this case,

Which again reminds me of writers, who, I have read,  
Drink and become alcoholics and die of alcoholism  
In far greater numbers than other people.

Symmetry suggests one myth, or significance: the drinking  
Of writers coming from too much concentration,  
In solitude, upon feelings expressed

For or even about possibly indifferent people, people  
Who are absent or perhaps dead, or unborn; the suicide  
Of psychiatrists coming from too much attention,

In most intimate contact, concentrated upon the feelings  
Of people toward whom one may feel indifferent,  
People who are certain, sooner or later, to die . . .

Or people about whom they care too much, after all?  
The significance of any life, of its misery and its end,  
Is not absolute—that is the despair which



Underlies their good sense, recycling their garbage,  
Voting, attending town-meetings, synagogues, churches,  
Weddings, contingent gatherings of all kinds.

#### XIV. Their Speech, Compared With Wisdom And Poetry

Terms of all kinds mellow with time, growing  
Arbitrary and rich as we call this man "neurotic"  
Or that man "a peacock." The lore of psychiatrists—

"Paranoid," "Anal" and so on, if they still use  
Such terms—also passes into the status of old sayings:  
Water thinner than blood or under bridges; bridges

Crossed in the future or burnt in the past. Or the terms  
Of myth, the phrases that well up in my mind:  
*Two blind women and a blind little boy, running—*

Easier to cut thin air into planks with a saw  
And then drive nails into those planks of air,  
Than to evade those three, the blind harriers,

The tireless blind women and the blind boy, pursuing  
For long years of my life, for long centuries of time.  
Concerning Justice, Fortune and Love I believe

That there may be wisdom, but no science and few terms:  
Blind, and blinding, too. Hot in pursuit and flight,  
Justice, Fortune and Love demand the arts

Of knowing and naming: and, yes, the psychiatrists, too,  
Patiently naming them. But all in pursuit and flight, two  
Blind women, tireless, and the blind little boy.

#### XV. A Footnote Concerning Psychiatry Itself

Having mentioned it, though it is not  
My subject here, I will say only that one  
Hopes it is good, and hopes that practicing it

The psychiatrists who are my subject here  
Will respect the means, however pathetic,  
That precede them; that they respect the patient's

Own previous efforts, strategies, civilizations—  
Not only whatever it is that lets a man consciously  
Desire girls of sixteen (or less) on the street,

And not embrace them, et cetera, but everything that was  
There already: the restraints, and the other lawful  
Old culture of wine, women, et cetera.

#### XVI. Generalizing, Just And Unjust

As far as one can generalize, only a few  
Are not Jewish. Many, I have heard, grew up  
As an only child. Among many general charges

Brought against them (smugness, obfuscation)  
Is a hard, venal quality. In truth, they do differ  
From most people in the special, tax-deductible status

Of their services, an enviable privilege which brings  
Venality to the eye of the beholder, who feels  
With some justice that if to soothe misery

Is a tax-deductible medical cost, then the lute-player,  
Waitress, and actor also deserve to offer  
Their services as tax-deductible; movies and TV

Should be tax-deductible . . . or nothing should;  
Such cash matters perhaps lead psychiatrists  
And others to buy what ought not to be sold: Seder

Services at hotels; skill at games from paid lessons;  
Fast divorce; the winning side in a war seen  
On TV like cowboys or football—*that* is how much

One can generalize: psychiatrists are as alike (and unlike)  
As cowboys. In fact, they are stock characters like cowboys:  
"Bette Davis, Claude Rains in *Now Voyager* (1942),

A sheltered spinster is brought out of her shell  
By her psychiatrist" and "Steven Boyd, Jack Hawkins  
In *The Third Secret* (1964), a psychoanalyst's

Daughter asks a patient to help her find her father's  
Murderer." Like a cowboy, the only child roams  
The lonely ranges and secret mesas of his genre.

#### XVII. Their Patients

As a rule, the patients I know do not pace  
Furiously, nor scream, nor shoot doctors. For them,  
To be a patient seems not altogether different

From one's interest in Anne Landers and her clients:  
Her virtue of taking it all on, answering  
Any question (artificial insemination by grandpa;

The barracuda of a girl who says that your glasses  
Make you look square) and her virtue of saying,  
Buster (or Dearie) stop complaining and do

What you want . . . and often that seems to be the point:  
After the glassware from Design Research, after  
A place on the Cape with Marimekko drapes,

The superlative radio and shoes, comes  
The contingency tax—serious people, their capacity  
For mere hedonism fills up, one seems to need

To perfect more complex ideas of desire,  
To overcome altruism in the technical sense,  
To learn to say no when you mean no and yes

When you mean yes, a standard of *cui bono*, a standard  
Which, though it seems to be the inverse  
Of more Spartan or Christian codes, is no less

Demanding in its call, inward in this case, to duty.  
It suggests a kind of league of men and women dedicated  
To their separate, inward duties, holding in common

Only the most general standard, or no standard  
Other than valuing a sense of the conflict  
Among standards, a league recalling in its mutual

Conflict and comfort the well-known fact that psychiatrists,  
Too, are the patients of other psychiatrists,  
Working dutifully—*cui bono*—at the inward standards.

#### XVIII. The Mad

Other patients are ill otherwise, and do  
Scream and pace and kill or worse; and that  
Should be recalled. Kit Smart, Hitler,

The contemporary poets of lunacy—none of them  
Helps me to think of the mad otherwise  
Than in clichés too broad, the maenads

And wild-eyed killers of the movies . . .  
But perhaps lunacy feels something like a cliché,  
A desperate or sweet yielding to some broad,

Mechanical simplification, a dispersal  
Of the unbearable into its crude fragments,  
The distraction of a repeated gesture

Or a compulsively hummed tune. Maybe  
It is not utterly different from chewing  
At one's fingernails. For the psychiatrists



It must come to seem ordinary, its causes  
And the causes of its relief; after all,  
No matter how remote and intricate, are no

Stranger than life itself, which was born or caused  
Itself, once, as a kind of odor, a faint wreath  
Brewing where the radiant light from billions

Of miles off strikes a faint broth from water  
Standing in rock; life born from the egg  
Of rock, and the egglike rock of death

Are no more strange than this other life  
Which we name after the moon, lunatic  
Other-life . . . housed, for the lucky ones,

In McLean's Hospital with its elegant,  
Prep-school atmosphere. When my friend  
Went in, we both tried to joke: "Karen," I said,

"You must be crazy to spend money and time  
In this place"—she gained weight,  
Made a chess-board, had a room-mate

Who introduced herself as the Virgin Mary,  
Referred to another patient: "Well, she must  
Be an interesting person, if she's in here."

#### XIX. Peroration, Defining Happiness

"I know not how it is, but certainly I  
Have never been more tired with any reading  
Than with dissertations upon happiness,

Which seems not only to elude inquiry,  
But to cast unmerciful loads of clay  
And sand and husks and stubble

Along the high-road of the inquirer.  
Even sound writers talk mostly in a drawling  
And dreaming way about it. He,

Who hath given the best definition  
Of most things, hath given but an imperfect one,  
Here, informing us that a happy life

Is one without impediment to virtue. . . .  
In fact, hardly anything which we receive  
For truth is really and entirely so,

Let it appear plain as it may, and let  
Its appeal be not only to the understanding,  
But to the senses; for our words do not follow

The senses exactly; and it is by words  
We receive truth and express it."  
So says Walter Savage Landor in his Imaginary

Conversation between Sir Philip Sidney  
And Fulke Greville, Lord Brooke, all three,  
In a sense, my own psychiatrists, shrinking

The sense of contingency and confusion  
Itself to a few terms I can quote, ponder  
Or type: the idea of wisdom, itself, shrinks.

#### XX. Peroration, Concerning Genius

As to my own concerns, it seems odd, given  
The ideas many of us have about art,  
That so many writers, makers of films,

Artists, all suitors of excellence and their own  
Genius, should consult psychiatrists, willing  
To risk that the doctor in curing

The sickness should smooth away the cicatrice  
Of genius, too. But it is all bosh, the false  
Link between genius and sickness,

Except perhaps as they were linked  
By the Old Man, addressing his class  
On the first day: "*I know why you are here.*"

*You are here to laugh. You have heard of a crazy  
Old man who believes that Robert Bridges  
Was a good poet; who believes that Fulke*

*Greville was a great poet, greater than Philip  
Sidney; who believes that Shakespeare's Sonnets  
Are not all that they are cracked up to be. . . . Well,*

*I will tell you something: I will tell you  
What this course is about. Sometime in the middle  
Of the Eighteenth Century, along with the rise*

*Of capitalism and scientific method, the logical  
Foundations of Western thought decayed and fell apart.  
When they fell apart, poets were left*

*With emotions and experiences, and with no way  
To examine them. At this time, poets and men  
Of genius began to go mad. Gray went mad. Collins*

*Went mad. Kit Smart was mad. William Blake surely  
Was a madman. Coleridge was a drug addict, with severe  
Depression. My friend Hart Crane died mad. My friend*

*Ezra Pound is mad. But you will not go mad; you will  
grow up  
To become happy, sentimental old college professors,  
Because they were men of genius, and you*

*Are not; and the ideas which were vital  
To them are mere amusement to you. I will not  
Go mad, because I have understood those ideas. . . ."*

He drank wine and smoked his pipe more than he should;  
In the end his doctors in order to prolong life  
Were forced to cut away most of his tongue.

That was their business. As far as he was concerned  
Suffering was life's penalty; wisdom armed one  
Against madness; speech was temporary; poetry was truth.

### XXI. Conclusion

Essaying to distinguish these men and women,  
Who try to give medicine for misery,  
From the rest of us, I find I have failed

To discover what essential statement could be made  
About psychiatrists that would not apply  
To all human beings, or what statement

About all human beings would not apply  
Equally to psychiatrists. They, too,  
Consult psychiatrists. They try tentatively

To understand, to find healing speech. They work  
For truth and for money. They are contingent . . .  
They talk and talk . . . they are, in the words

Of a lute-player I met once who despised them,  
"Into machines" . . . all true of all, so that it seems  
That "psychiatrist" is a synonym for "human being,"

Even in their prosperity which is perhaps  
Like their contingency merely more vivid than that  
Of lutanists, opticians, poets—all into



Truth, into music, into yearning, suffering,  
Into elegant machines and luxuries, with caroling  
And kisses, with soft rich cloth and polished

Substances, with cash, tennis and fine electronics,  
Liberty of lush and reverend places—goods  
And money in their contingency and spiritual

Grace evoke the way we are all psychiatrists,  
All fumbling at so many millions of miles  
Per minute and so many dollars per hour

Through the exploding or collapsing spaces  
Between stars, saying what we can.