Life and Death: Subways and the Defense of Poetry

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In 1938 Walker Evans shot his last assignment for the Farm Securities Administration. The pictures that would become his most famous work, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men were already complete. That fall, the Museum of Modern Art staged a one-man show with 100 selections culled from his tenure as the staff photographer for the FSA. He was thirty-five.

His reputation had been made on pictures that were, in his words, "non-artistic and non-commercial." It's a fair appraisal. Unflinchingly journalistic, but beautiful without aestheticizing, the pictures exist somewhere between these two words, effortlessly comprehending the sufferings of the rural poor during the great depression. The influences in the FSA pictures are diverse, but one, according to Evans, predominates: Flaubert. Later in life, Evans described his main concern in the pictures as keeping himself distanced from his subjects, "staying out [...] the way Flaubert does in his writing" (Qtd. Grennough). Always literary—he had studied literature at Williams College and, in 1930, had shot illustrations for Hart Crane's The Bridge—Evans set to work producing a Flaubertian oeuvre that depicted suffering without flinching or melodramatic pathos.

In the pictures that compose Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, Flaubert is present not just in the approach, but in the material. Though none of the women could be Madame Bovary, the brutal treatment of the rural landscape is poetic without being beautiful and saturated in Flaubertian despondency. The dusty Model-T in front of a barber's shop in one image might be the Hirondelle, and in the image of the Sprott, Alabama Post Office one is reminded of Mssr. Homais's Golden Lion Inn with its cadre of aimless men waiting passively for inevitability. The portraits might find their way into

Flaubert's story, plainly depicting the sort of poverty that flickers around its edges. But the whites are bright and the darks are solid. There is an aesthetic purity, a release, amid the suffering, glimpses of open sky. These hints of the pastoral suggest that it may have been as much the social realism of Evans's photographs as their pastoral—if painful—beauty that won them so much acclaim. But while the praise resounded on all sides (except the New York Times, which accused Evans of revealing only America's "bumps, warts, boils, and blackheads"), Evans was nowhere to be found (Qtd. Grennough).

He had begun a new project which, while equally Flaubertian in approach, relied on radically new content. The project, shot between 1938 and 1941, would not be published until the mid-1960s, the elapsed time and broad cultural changes only increasing the distance between art and artist—a distance already more than evident in the pictures. They are all portraits, but are completely unposed. Often, negatives include three or more people, but in printing Evans would select them out, sometimes into pairs or, most often, into solitude. The distance in these pictures comes from their subjects' obliviousness to the entire enterprise. Shot mostly on the Lexington Avenue line of the New York City Subway, the false light of the underground lends a tone of desperation, a sallow and emphatic enthusiasm, much like Flaubertian prose. Some figures whiting out in the glare, some acquiescing to the shadows. Shot with a 35mm camera hidden inside Evans's coat, these portraits catch exhausted men in newsboy hats, executives with the papers spread before them, women staring at the black squares of window. The diversity of the crowd is balanced by the commonness of their shared predicament: the endless commute through loneliness or desperation or expectation or exhaustion.

When it was finally published in 1966, Many Are Called contained more than one hundred of these prints. But its final image is quite different. While nearly all of the Subway Portraits seem to have been taken while Evans was seated across from the subject with the dark windows or advertisements from the Department of Public Health framing the image, this picture seems to have been shot while Evans was standing up. In the picture, the now-antique hand-rings trail unevenly off from the top left of the frame and following their tilt a row of unfocused faces sandwiched between dark hats and coats track across the shot. The picture's ostensible subject is the man standing at bottom right. Ill-lit as the rest, his head comes dangerously close to merging with blurred light bulb farther back in the train. His eyes are closed, his mouth, like his accordion, is open. He is ready to sing the next line. He fingers an E-flat major. All gazes are averted.

one

> *...he was in process of saying that in his opinion art should have ideas behind it when we were torn asunder, as one is torn from the old lady about to pour out tea and the young man about to hit the tennis ball in the back garden of the suburban villa as one rushes past in the train.*
>
> *Virginia Woolf, "The Mark on the Wall"*

Throughout the twentieth century, urban industrial imperatives—like superhighways and subway trains—have been accused of murdering art. When rushing around on airplanes

or trains, no time remains to talk about aesthetics or the ideas behind them. When you're on your way to *Fiddler*, you needn't attend the wheezy song of the accordion man. In the twentieth century, nearly all of the arts have, at one time or another, complained about the deleterious effects technology was having on their audiences—especially poetry. In a 1941 essay, Delmore Schwartz suggested that poetry's diminution had nothing to do with "the poet and his way of life; but rather with the whole way of life in modern society" in which "poetry, culture, sensibility, [and] imagination were isolated." He continues:

> there was no room in the increasing industrialization of society for such a monster as the cultivated man; a man's taste for literature had at best nothing to do with most of the activities which constituted daily life in an industrial society. (7)

Ten years later, poet Randall Jarrell blamed "newspapers and magazines and books and motion pictures and radio stations and television stations," which had, he claimed, destroyed "the capacity for understanding real poetry, real art of any kind" (13). In Jarrell's assessment, this society of built-in "systematic unreceptiveness" was being bludgeoned with media and other pressing imperatives; the bus to the train to work all day in a factory under neon lights effectively killing poetry or *real art of any kind* (9).

While today it might seem easy to dismiss these complaints as schematic and predictable, it probably would have been nearly as easy to do so in the early 1950s. Poets had been blaming various cultural institutions for the downfall and death of their art for a very long times. Though attacks on science and technology began in the nineteenth century, general prognostications about the death of poetry predate subways, modern

cities, and modernism. Specific enunciations of poetry's death—or at least its preternatural sickness—seem to have begun around the sixteenth century, but their origin is even more distant.

The first so-called defender of poetry was the author of The Decameron, Giovanni Bocccaccio. That Boccaccio would be its author seems surprising since he was probably the first poet laureate, given, in 1373, a chair designated for the exposition of the Divine Comedy (Reedy 1). Along with this work and his own prose, Boccaccio was greatly occupied with keeping Greek and Roman culture alive in fourteenth century Florence, which was not an entirely easy task. Still, to this end he produced the voluminous Genealogy of the Gods, an encyclopedic tome of mythology, the final two books of which "inveigh against the Enemies of the Name of Poetry" (14). These enemies include everyone from the rich (who are indifferent to poetry) to friars (who would abuse poetry by turning it only to their own purposes). Boccaccio takes the time to upbraid all, but also directs part of his energy towards Plato, who, in the final book of his Republic, disallows poets a place in his ideal state.[1] Boccaccio suggests that the philosopher would have banned only some poets from his ideal state. These poets—implicitly the majority—write socially, spiritually useful poetry—the sort that, Boccaccio concludes, "conduces [one] to righteousness" (76). This is the real concern of the "defense." While it takes the time to refute some claims made against poetry, its central purpose is the construction of an idea of a poetry that is spiritually important to its readers—even if it, like mythology, isn't Christian.

[1] The choice is an odd one. It is, as one commentator puts it, among the "most famous, and outrageous, arguments" in Plato (Annas 336).

Boccaccio's defense lays out the groundwork for the majority of defenses that followed. Nearly all allude to Plato and nearly all promote poetry as something more than aesthetic, an art that is inherently useful to its reader. Two hundred years later, Sir Philip Sidney would pick up this argument in his Defense of Poesy. Moving beyond Boccaccio's tendency to lambaste poetry's mis-readers, Sidney devotes nearly his entire essay to the promotion and explanation of poetry's usefulness. It is the greatest of the arts, synthesizing what is good about history and philosophy into a moral and intellectual tool that is also beautiful. Put simply, poetry is spiritually galvanizing, morally generative, and aesthetically supreme. Though Sidney places such emphasis on the spiritual power of poetry, the Defense is a document of broad utility. One contemporary critic calls it a "persuasive justification ... that a sensible and comprehensive control over human affairs can be learnt from splendid poems" (Shepard 1). Shepard's easy move from spiritual potency to *human affairs* makes clear the social and spiritual range of Sidney's Defense.

The uncompromising terms on which Sidney set forth poetry's power are not his only contribution to the defense of poetry. His essay is built around a paradox that has dogged the defense of poetry ever since. In 1594, when the book was first published, Sidney had been dead for nearly ten years. That November William Ponsonby—who often printed things for the Sidney family—entered the Defense into the Stationer's Register, but apparently did not publish the book until early 1595. In the meantime, Henry Olney published the same text under the title An Apology for Poetry. Though some copies were sold, Ponsonby won an apparently easy legal injunction barring its further sale.

Despite the removal of the offending title page, the apologetic strains in Sidney's essay remain evident.[2] In the essay's earliest moments, Sidney claims that he had only by "mischaunce slipt into the title of a Poet" and was compelled to make this "pittifull defense" of his "unelected vocation" because "poore Poetrie...is falne to be the laughing stocke of children" (3, 4). And it is not just poetry Sidney singles out for abuse. Towards the end of the essay he refers to his Defense as "this inck-wasting toy of mine" much as he appeals to his readers to leave off their "Scorne" and no longer "laugh at" poetry (45). This language of lament—such a polar opposition to the profound claim that "poesy is full of virtue-breeding delightfulness, and void of no gift that ought to be in the noble name of learning"—may have caused some confusion about the exact purposes of Sidney's essay (45). Though clearly an Apology only in the classical sense, this conflict between vindication and lament becomes one of Sidney's great influences on many of poetry's subsequent death-notices.

But before this paradoxical tendency towards lament took hold of the tradition, Shelley offered a vigorous defense imbued with a more specific historical relevance. As the shift towards an industrial economy began to overwhelm Britain in the early nineteenth century and science began to dominate the public imagination, the arts were felt to be suffering a sort of displacement. Written in 1821, Shelley's "A Defense of Poetry" is clearly evidence of this anxiety among the artists of the day. Still, Shelley followed his precedents. He alludes to Plato—whom he names a poet—and insists on poetry's moral authority. "Poetry strengthens that faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man in the same manner as exercise strengthens a limb" (283). In its complete

[2] While in the late sixteenth century, *apology* still retained much of its Latin significance of 'defense,' it had also developed something of its contemporary sense.

refusal to acknowledge the ideals of efficiency and progress that made technology so popular, Shelley's claim of moral potency offers a brilliant response to this encroachment. Though Shelley's argument is full of taut (if overdramatic) phrases, it has been handed down to subsequent defenders in its own neat self-summary, the famously thundering final sentences:

> Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present; the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle and feel not what they inspire; the influence which is moved not, but moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world. (297)

In a few sentences, poets are given claim to prophetic religious powers and global, almost martial, political force. In barrage of claims, Shelley expertly pushes past anxiety about poetry's eroding place in the political mainstream, reasserting some of poetry's historical cultural functions. While poets might have been statesmen in the Greek polis, and while the sibyl spoke in verse, these cultural functions—at least in any broad sense—had been denied to poetry for a very long time. Rather than address the difficult position in which poetry found itself, Shelley synthesizes its past functions into a present tense which expects a glorious future. Though hints of gloom remain (that the *legislators* are *unacknowledged* is the clear marker), the swooping rhetoric leads the reader towards a fervid and boundless optimism.

But across the ocean, the state of poetry looked very different. Composed at almost exactly the same time as Shelley's "Defense," Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "Defense of Poetry" fell quite clearly in line with Sidney's lament. Decrying poetry's "ornamental" place in American culture, Longfellow spends much of the essay lambasting the reading public and hardly discusses poetry at all (311). Ironically, the poets who do appear are all dead and European—the "Gentle Sir Philip Sidney," not surprisingly, plays a major role. This is quite odd since Longfellow's muted closing—a depressingly extended quotation from Ben Jonson—seems designed to induce American poets to find and define the voice of the new country. Though Longfellow makes this intent clear, his conclusion feels tacked on and inconsequential since the essay is, in essence, cultural criticism. It spends far more time with its judgments of society than with any explanation of what the new poetry it calls for might look like.

Late in the essay, Longfellow admits that he paints "the portrait of modern poetry in rather gloomy colors," and though the gloom can clearly be traced back to Sidney, Longfellow's essay is the first formal defense in which gloom is so strongly prevalent. Referring to Sidney's Defense, Longfellow laments:

> O that in our country it might be the harbinger of as bright an intellectual day as it was in his own! With us, the spirit of the age is clamorous for utility—for visible, tangible, utility—for bare, brawny, muscular utility. We would be roused to action by the voice of the populace, and the sounds of the crowded mart, and not "lulled asleep in shady idleness with poet's pastimes." We are swallowed up in schemes for gain and engrossed with contrivances for bodily enjoyments... (306)

This carries on for more than a page.

Longfellow's "Defense" marks a turning point. With the predominance of gloom, his "Defense of Poetry" does more than simply paint a gloomy portrait of modern poetry, it shoves modern poetry into the margins. Though the relationship between Longfellow's work and twentieth-century defenses is far from causative, it is his reckoning of a defense of poetry as an attack on society that becomes the mainstay of twentieth-century defenses. These attacks take two basic forms. The first, like Longefellow's, is an assault which, while steeping itself in a certain remorse about the state of poetry, launches an attack against the fragility of the society—any society—that wouldn't cherish poetry. This pose seems especially bizarre in Longfellow's case since he gained unqualified marketplace success as a poet and novelist, his Courtship of Miles Standish selling 15,000 copies on the first day of publication (Gioia "Hear"). The second variety of attack borrows from the Sidneyean topos of apology. These essays predominate and are steeped in the ever-growing fear of poetry's steady march to the precipice of "inck-wasting" irrelevance. The culture was either tragically indifferent to poetry (which justified lament) or lacking, tragically, in the intelligence to appreciate it (which justified attack). Whatever side they take, subsequent defenses follow Longfellow in pushing poetry itself to the margins. Poetry, in a popular phrase, is dead. The real objective is to discover on whom or what or where the blame should fall and perhaps figure out how the corpse might be revived.

While defenses of poetry had appeared only sporadically since Boccaccio, the twentieth century shows an absolute flowering. In the 1930s, Edmund Wilson wrote

about the ways in which prose had stolen the power of poetry and by mid-century, things appeared especially bleak. Both Schwartz and Jarrell published multiple essays on the topic, generally lamenting, but occasionally attacking. Schwartz's catalogue includes not just "The Isolation of Modern Poetry," from which I quote above, but "Views of a Second Violinist, Some Answers to Questions about Writing Poetry," and a particularly sad essay called "The Present State of Poetry." Jarrell, in "The Obscurity of the Poet," argues that it is the increasing difficulty of poetry that pushes the poet farther from the culture. While "Obscurity" is Jarrell's most famous essay on the topic, his work is dotted with emphatic accusations. "To the Laodiceans," a long essay on Frost, begins "Back in the days when 'serious readers of modern poetry' were most patronizing to Frost's poems" (19). At once Jarrell has chastised readers less intelligent than he (the scare-quoted 'serious readers') and accused them of abandonment.

But no one put it more clearly than poet Edwin Muir, who in 1955 began the Norton Lectures at Harvard by noting that

> the actual response of a community to the poetry that is written for it...has greatly shrunk in the last two centuries and shrunk alarmingly.... At present, poetry is neglected in all civilized countries, and it appears to be declining even in what we call uncivilized ones. (2)

This was to say nothing, as Schwartz did not, of "the public's skill or lack of skill in reading poetry as it appears on the page" (33). Though Schwartz's rhetoric ("skill or lack of skill") suggests slightly more equanimity than Muir's blanket statement, both poets

place the blame squarely on the community. Poetry's quality is inherent, but its readership is shrinking and neglectful. Muir's lectures—later published as The Estate of Poetry, which (from such an inauspicious beginning) does not blossom into much of a place to visit—take as common knowledge this diminution of poetry's public place in the "civilized" countries and this assumption continues throughout the twentieth century. Years later, in his final book, critic M.L. Rosenthal detailed the "unconscious conspiracy...to keep people from their poetry" (ix). Whether expressed with invective or sadness, the dominant theme was poetry's (and the poet's) isolation, which was quite frequently metaphorically equated with sickness or death.

Not only did poets rail against their isolation, but some went so far as to decry the optimism in their predecessors. One of the most common areas of doubt was the political feasibility of poetry. Shelley's formulation of poets as *unacknowledged legislators of the world*—though it too is anchored in a lament—does announce a significant political efficacy for poetry. But even such efficacy appeared to be a problem. While poetry might be politically engaged, it still faced the predicament of its own isolation. One could produce moving, brilliant political poems, but if no one was there to read them, what good were they?

In his wide-ranging essay "What is Literature?" Jean-Paul Sartre notes that poetry often failed to "provoke the indignation or the political enthusiasm" of its readers (32). Perhaps, he suggests, this failure is caused by poetry's difficulty:

> [...] by choosing to write for a virtual public, authors would have had to adapt their art to the capacities of the readers...[writing] would have had to give up

> some of the exquisite forms of narrative, poetry, and even reasoning, for the sole reason that they would be inaccessible to readers without culture. (112)

If poetry is too difficult for its audience, its political potential is effaced. But yoking the implicit difficulty of exquisite forms—though one might object that a Vilanelle is exquisite and can be used in poetry for children—to readers, Sartre takes this argument one step further. The poem's political potential is directly tied to its social potential—so whether it languishes unread or is read, but marked incomprehensible, the poem is not achieving its political goals.

Sartre's reading—perhaps because it is ultimately more concerned with validating the political usefulness of prose like that of his recent novels The Age of Reason and The Reprieve—has not been much discussed. George Oppen, on the other hand, is invariably quoted when the potential of political poetry is in question. A member of the Objectivist movement in the 1930s, Oppen was an anti-corporate, anti-fascist long before such views were commonplace in poetic circles. Remarkably, Oppen, after publishing his first collection in 1934, stopped writing poetry for nearly twenty years, because, as his wife Mary put it in a 1980 interview "it was imperative to do something about the things we saw on the streets" (Hatlen 25). During that period, the Oppens worked with the Communist party and Oppen fought in the Second World War. In the late 1950s, Oppen began writing again and eventually wrote "Disasters," an opaque pronouncement on poetic politics that includes the lines:

> of wars o western

wind and storm

of politics I am sick with a poet's
vanity legislators

of the unacknowledged

world

The shift in unacknowedgement from the *legislators* in Shelley to the *world* in Oppen indicates that the accusation of *vanity* is aimed directly at poets who proclaim such political potency or who are focused on their actions as legislators, rather than on the laws they manage to enact. "Disasters," in fact, reads like a direct attack on Shelley. Its landscape is a wasteland of lone, level sands whipped by a Shelleyan western wind. In juxtaposing Shelley's proclamations of poetry's profound cultural power with these desert allusions, Oppen shows the worrisome inconsistency in these claims about poetry's power. Moreover, Oppen—like so many other twentieth century commentators—manages to place poetry in an isolated space. How, the poem seems to ask, can poetry legislate when it is—like the Ramses statue in Shelley's "Ozymandias"—nothing more than a wreck abandoned in the desert.

Even in discussions of politics, isolation dominates. By the middle of the twentieth century, the defense of poetry had become a venue mostly for the lament of culture and the public's refusal to enjoy, understand, or even read poetry. Defense had

become death. Perhaps even more remarkable than this switch is that Plato's hopes had finally come to fruition. According to poets themselves, neither they nor their art were part of the republic of contemporary life. While all held—in some variety—the belief descended from Boccaccio, Sidney, and Shelley that poetry was useful, angry laments of death in isolation were, more often than not, all that could be offered in defense of poetry.

two

On Labor Day 1976, San Francisco poet Ron Silliman created "an event." He would "ride Bart for a day for a quarter" turning "a day of rest" into a day "of description." This experiment produced the poem "Bart," a book-length, free-verse one-sentence trip through the landscape of the contemporary American city. The poem contains moments of introspection, comedy, and claustrophobia, but one image is particularly evocative: "fat woman with two boys, she shouts at them to sit down, I see my reflection in the window, no views beneath the earth's surface." Silliman's simple clauses imply the cruelty of the woman, and its juxtaposition with the reflection of the poet suggest the combination of inescapability and brutality built in to nearly ever trip.

The grating paradox of overbearing humanity and reflective isolation is not the only unpleasant aspect of the subway. It is dim and full of indescribable smells, strange noises, and suspiciously stained floors. The encumbrances of today's subways, though, are slight compared with those of the first subway line. Conceived as a way of removing the Fleet Street poor to an apparently out-of-sight and out-of-mind "garden suburb," the London Underground took nearly twenty years to run its first train. On 9 January 1863, what would become the Circle Line carried passengers the two miles between Paddington

and Farringdon Streets. Packed with people and cloyingly smoky, the subway that day was both soot-stained and euphoric.

But the subway's history is not responsible for coloring our negative perceptions. Maybe it's the darkness or the time we were forcefully panhandled or the herd of late trains that seem to swallow entire days in one indifferent gulp; the too-long commutes; the inescapable and absolute destitution that paints the face of fellow passengers; the stink of rotting trash and stiflingly sweaty people. Composed of each of these singularly unbearable moments, happening again and again, the subway is unbearable. But it is also a place where giggling children sing church songs, where unexpected smiles are bestowed, and where strangers sometimes laugh together. It is a place where we live our lives.

Its importance to contemporary life came quickly. After London's trains achieved immediate popularity—King's Cross Station so packed that first day that disappointed travelers had to wait hours for a train—a handful of cities began to imitate (Trench 138). By the turn of the century Budapest, Paris, and Boston all had underground trains. By the middle of the twentieth century, subways had spread from Buenos Aires to Tokyo and Mexico City to Madrid. A mode of transportation uniquely suited to centralized, industrialized cities, the predominance of subway systems continued to increase over the course of the twentieth century.[3]

While these networks became increasingly essential to the formation of modern cities, they also became part of contemporary consciousness. One of the earliest subway poems is Ezra Pound's imagist blurb "In a Station of the Metro." Written in 1913 about

[3] Today as global populations continue to urbanize, their importance continues to expand as driving in cities—like London under Mayor Ken Livingstone's 2003 plan to reduce congestion—has become less and less feasible, forcing an increased dependence on public transportation.

an experience Pound had at La Concorde metro stop in Paris, the poem is classic imagism:

> The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
> Petals on a wet, black bough.

The abrupt juxtaposition of the faces in a crowd with the tender petals lightens the troubling weight of the multitude and gives the pressing, urban scene a less emotionally distraught feel. The off-rhyme of *crowd* and *bough* binds the images more intimately and turns the pressing daily concern of riding the subway into nothing more than an *apparition*. The actual experience of the first line—the crowd at the station—becomes ghostly in comparison with the implicitly more important beauty of the petals on the branch. Pound's poem works against expectations by finding beauty in the subway, though it achieves this perception only by juxtaposing the crowd with a remarkably removed natural image. Silliman goes farther, finding beauty immediately in the subway. After the whorl of colors that make a rainbow of the carpet, he writes: "going faster now, lights flicker now out the windows, dark there, not flicker but was pass them so quickly." The clauses here stack into something that approximates amazement. Both poems, then, reconsider the subway, pushing us to find something more than suffering among the exhaust fumes and crowds.

Aesthetic beauty is one possibility. The simple act of writing poems on trains, Silliman's "act of description" implicitly creates an aesthetic valorization of the subway, but in the 1950s Langston Hughes discovered more than beauty in this network of trains.

In his 1951 poem "Subway Rush Hour"—part of Montage of a Dream Deferred—Hughes uses the idiom of race both literally and metaphorically to show how these trains can force and forge a network of human connections.

> Mingled
> breath and smell
> so close
> mingled
> black and white
> so near
> no room for fear.

The subway is a place where the diversity of our culture is inexorably in action. Like Pound before him, Hughes shows the possibilities of this diversity through blatant juxtaposition. While the first three lines suggest the wholly commonplace impositions of a crowded subway car, the emphatic repetition of *mingled* encourages the reader to put aside these gripes and bring her desire for racial harmony to the fore. Since the poem divides perfectly into structural halves, the synonyms that compose the line *breath and smell* counterbalance the presumed antonyms of *black and white*, forcing the reader to make a simple comparison between the intermingling inherent in public transportation and the racial reconciliation—which in 1951 seemed far from simple. Hughes reminds us that the nuisances of the subway shrink in comparison to the subway's ability to create an

open space for social equity and—as the final line with its resonant rhyme indicates—reconciliation.

The diversity Bart presents to Silliman shows the progress implied in Hughes's poem:

> I'm the only white left on the car [...] kids dash up and down aisles, whooping, parents not caring to stop it, Japanese man asks me if this is Fremont, people get on, I see that the woman in the wheel chair is Indian or Pakistani, children are crying or whimpering in español, sign on a hillside says Niles

The diversity in this moment is both striking and commonplace. Hughes's *fear* never crosses Silliman's mind. The car's diversity is simply part of the aesthetic experience of riding the train all day. Despite our assumptions and associations, the subway can be both aesthetically beautiful and socially formative—sometimes, as each of these poems seems to suggest, it is both at once.

In his recent ethnography In the Metro, French anthropologist Marc Augé makes this potential even more explicit, arguing that the metro is increasingly shaping human memory, consciousness, and culture. Augé's subway is the Paris Metro where the diversity of his native city, he suggests, is most evident. In subways, argues Augé, the constant, at times frustrating, interaction with fellow citizens "defines the limits and meaning of the social" (70). While it is obvious that all cultures do not have trains coursing under their cities, Augé, whose anthropological work has dealt mostly with the cultures of the Ivory Coast, feels in the metro something of a remarkable inevitability.

Routes are "daily and obligatory." "We do not choose to retain them or not in our memory" he explains, yet in this everyday routine, we come to define ourselves. Augé begins his discussion by focusing on the significance certain metro stops have taken for him as a sort of Proustian memnotechnic—"I rarely go by Vaneau or Sèvres-Babylone without pausing to think about my grandparents," who had lived equidistant from the two stops (4). But for Augé the subway is not just a memorial "privilege" of city dwellers. While it unconsciously defines our personal recollections, it also forces us to recognize the new and always-changing diversity of our society—think of Silliman's self-consciousness, *I'm the only white left on the car*. But Augé's analysis suggests we don't just notice "foreigners and those whose skin color" is different, but subtler differences: languages, styles, choices of newspaper, and—implicit in all of these—underlying beliefs (8, 13). Even if we are unable to pinpoint these differences, in the metro we are brought face-to-face daily, almost unconsciously, with their place in the culture we call our own. The differences between "Bart" and "subway (rush hour)" exemplify this. For Hughes, the subway holds the power of racial reconciliation; in the later poem, the subway's diversity is almost too predictable to be noted. The train is simply a place where one can engage in an "act of description" of that diversity. His racial understanding focuses not on the diversity, but on realizing his place in it.

In his conclusion, Augé writes:

> [...] the Parisian metro for me has always been associated with the ineluctable and irreversible character of the individual human voyage...the metro [has] taught that

> one can always change lines and stations, and the fact that if one can't escape the labyrinth of the network, it at least offers some beautiful detours. (71)

Here the metro is a metaphor, the network of tunnels running under the city become the connected lives that compose the aboveground culture. The implication of Augé's argument seems to be that while the cultural network aboveground is frayed and unstable with lives sliding into isolation, the subway allows these life-lines a meeting point. In French, this is a *correspondance*—a transfer—a place of intersection where the insularity of one's private world is called into question and where directions or plans can be changed.

Even without such an affirmative metaphorical turn, Augé emphasizes—in a way that neither Pound nor Hughes could foresee—the importance of the subway in contemporary culture. While it can be a place of beauty and diversity it is, increasingly, one of the few places where people of all sorts meet. In London, the Tube serves over six million people daily. In Paris the number is roughly the same and New York's MTA serves nearly eight million. These are, as James Agee writes in the introduction to Many Are Called,

> members of every race and nation of the earth. They are of all ages, of all temperaments, of all classes, of almost every imaginable occupation. Each is incorporate in such an intense and various concentration of human beings as the world has never known before. Each, also, is an individual existence, as matchless as a thumbprint or a snowflake. Each wears garments which of themselves are

> exquisitely subtle uniforms and badges of their being. Each carries in the postures of his body, in his hands, in his face, in the eyes, the signatures of a time and a place in the world upon a creature for whom the name immortal soul is one mild and vulgar metaphor.

three

Poetry and subways have been closely related. Pound, Hughes, and Silliman are not the only poets who have written about—or on—subways. As early as 1908, poems—by poets such as Swinburne, Milton, Longfellow, Pope, Coleridge, and others—were appearing on subway trains. That year, the London Underground began to produce posters promoting new train lines and bus routes. The posters were large—"double royal": forty by twenty-five inches—and often quite visually striking. Commissioned directly from artists, the posters established a patronage relationship between the Underground and the arts community in London—subsidizing artists and becoming prized quarry for collectors. These posters became a mainstay in tube stations until the 1970s.[4]

Though these posters were a public appearance for poetry, defenders might still have had reason to doubt. The poems appeared in brutally short passages—usually no more than a line or two—and were often unattributed. The poetry often seems inessential or, to use Longfellow's word, ornamental. It has almost no relation to the poster's main intention—selling a place—and is always backgrounded to the poster's image.

[4] Even in their earliest incarnations, press runs would sometimes print more than two hundred extra posters to sell to collectors. Recently, a number of books, including By Underground to Kew and Underground Art: London Transport posters, 1908 to the present, have been published collecting the images and today the London Transport Museum still sells reproductions of the historical posters.

One poster from 1920 advertises a new bus route to the small Surrey town of Dorking. The poster is dominated by a gentle countryside done in colors borrowed from Toulouse-Lautrec. Green hills roll off to the distance while in the foreground a black clump of trees throws shade onto a shocking yellow field. The text below is bold and simple: "DORKING BY MOTORBUS," but beneath it are five lines from Matthew Arnold's "Thyrsis." Nostalgic for "these slopes" Arnold asks "who knows them if not I?" But the poem is not about simple nostalgia, nor is it about Surrey. Arnold is writing about the Oxfordshire downs that he frequented with school friend Arthur Hugh Clough, whom "Thyrsis" elegizes. While this abuse of the elegy and the geographic appropriation seems slightly distasteful, it isn't egregious. It does, after all, offer poetry directly to commuters in Tube stations all around London.

Another poster—this one from the 1930s—offers readers this quatrain:

Away to the green, green country,
    Under the open sky;
Where the earth's sweet breath is incense
    And the lark sings psalms on high.

Unlike the Arnold poster, these lines are unattributed and dwarfed under the image of a small child reaching up to her mother with a butterfly perched on her outstretched hand. Around this pastoral idyll, children dance in a green expanse with a bold swath of sky behind. The scene is sentimental, but contains a certain unfaultable generosity. While neither the image nor the quatrain offer much for consideration, one can imagine the

vaguely religious connotations and the pleasant, if clichéd, image offering comfort to weary commuters after a long day. In the exhaust-thick tunnels and trains this innocent pastoral must have seemed consoling or, in the very least, nice.

In context, though, the quatrain proves a surprising choice. It comes from James Thomson's 1863 "Sunday at Hampstead," a longish poem which vacillates with almost whiplash frequency between cloying sentimentality and the intractable gloom for which Thomson is famous. Not usually a bard of the *open sky*, Thomson is better known for pronouncements that "all is vanity and nothingness" and images of the "black veil" that "none can pierce [...] Because there is no light beyond the curtain."

Like most of his poetry, Thomson's life provides a disquieting contrast to the idyllic poster. Born in Scotland, Thomson, when both of his parents died, was soon sent to a London boarding school for the impoverished children of sailors. In an age of expansive optimism, he grew up to be a great doubter and, more troublingly, a binge-prone alcoholic. Unable to keep a job, he moved around—working for a mining company, for a tobacco-advertising magazine, and as a teacher in the army, among other posts. Finally, in 1880 he published two books of poetry and in 1881 released a volume of essays, but all met with poor reviews. By age 48, Thomson's drinking had worsened and he had developed cancer. In June of 1882, he died on a binge. His self-penned epitaph, read aloud at his funeral, was deemed unprintable.

While his biography might explain why Thomson's name was absent from the pastoral poster, it doesn't erase the bitter irony of the happy child with a mother in the

green meadow juxtaposed against Thomson's life of unflagging defeat. Put in context, the poster provokes, at the very least, a well-deserved smirk.[5]

If misused and ornamental, these poetic fragments were still an essential part of any underground journey. As early as 1921 the Underground were spending over £60,000 annually on the posters alone (Green 11). Until the Second World War new posters were appearing monthly. But by the mid-1970s and early 1980s the Underground had reached a financial nadir and could no longer afford to commission art. The posters, along with their poetry, disappeared.

On 29 January 1986 a new breed of posters—smaller and designed to fit in the trains themselves—appeared. Like their predecessors, these poems were short—none longer than sixteen lines—but they were complete poems, attributed to authors who were not just white, dead British men. Though dead white men had their place, these posters also included women and men from around the world. Riders were as likely to read a poem by an American man as a Guyanese woman; as likely to discover a British countess as an anonymous poet who proclaims "Ich am of Irlonde." Though this diversity was, in 1986, obligatory, the project was remarkably different from what had come before. According to Judith Chernaik, one of its founders, this was more than just an evolutionary step from the old posters; it was born of a sort of divine inspiration. "Soon after reading through As You Like It with a few friends, I was seized by a vision," writes Chernaik. "Odes upon hawthorns, elegies on brambles...why not hang poems on the Underground?" ("Books"). A strange crossbreeding of Orlando's penchant for

[5] Writing in 1926, art critic Roger Fry accused the Underground posters of being "tinged with a new poetry—a new romance," reviling the obvious sentimentality like that of the Thomson poster (qtd. Posters 14).

publication and geographic reimagination, Poems on the Underground was founded in the hopes of discovering a Forest of Arden in the dark tunnels coursing under London.

It was a simple plan. Poems filling un-let advertising spots on the Tube. A group of Londoners—lecturer and writer Chernaik, along with poets Ciceley Herbert and Gerard Benson—would select five poems, all sonnet length or shorter and deliver them to the nearly two million commuters who rode the London Underground each day (Trench). With a grant intended to "widen the dissemination of poetry" and the support of Faber and Oxford University Press—the two biggest poetry publishers in the U.K.—Poems on the Underground began printing the posters and bought 500 advertising spaces. With "guarded interest," the London Rail Transport (LRT) matched them. This is how, on a January morning in 1986, one thousand placards, each bearing one of five poems, appeared on the Tube.

The poems are as diverse as their authors. Formally, they range from sonnets—both Petrarchan and English—to unpunctuated free verse and include ballads, songs, benedictions and various hybrid forms. Despite all of this formal diversity, the poems that appear on the train were remarkably similar. They were sweet and almost universally sincere. Yeats challenges readers to "Prove that I lie," and Philip Larkin ends a springtime song with trees that "Begin afresh, afresh, afresh." The poems are sometimes funny—Stevie Smith praises "elephants and the miasmas/ And the general view"—but nearly all are tender, first-person lyrics. Nostalgia is one of the most prominent climates. An anonymous song from the 16th century sighs "Christ if my love were in my arms/ and I in my bed again"; Francis Thompson dreams of halcyon school days; Seamus Heaney and Grace Nichols—whose poems were among the first selections—each return to

childhood, “like a beacon/ against the cold.” The poems are pleasant and considerate, generous in feeling, and considered carefully, as Chernaik writes, “for [their] possible impact on the Tube, where people may be exhausted and irritable or close to despair” (“Books”).

With poems so hopeful and a creation myth rooted fancifully in Shakespearean romance, it is not difficult to see that Chernaik’s program situated itself directly against the typically moribund outlook on twentieth-century poetry. The founding conviction—“that poetry is a popular, living art, and that the pleasures of rhythm and rhyme are part of common life”—rings with Shelleyan optimism, but it lacks the more common flipside of lament (100 Poems 13). Attributing such power to poetry is not remarkable, but it is one of the program’s unique successes to act on the claim. Rather than attacking the culture or lamenting poetry’s displacement, Poems on the Underground simply placed poetry in the “great democratic meeting-place” of the subway, what Chernaik—after fifteen years of Poems on the Underground—calls “a most hospitable, if unexpected, venue for the imaginative life” (2001 xxiv). Poems on the Underground amounts to more than an implicit defense of poetry. Intellectually, it stands against the common assumptions about poetry and its lost audience; pragmatically, it puts its beliefs into action and discovers this audience. While its graceful mixing of imagination and pragmatics are noteworthy, the economics of the project were an even greater flight of fancy. Even in the brightest of times most poets didn’t have the money to buy space generally reserved for government warnings and toothpaste ads. Riding the trains to work that morning, the advertising agents who designed those toothpaste ads must have compared their work to the poems and the government copywriters might have wondered

if their notices lacked a certain shine. Some air of magic more like Prospero's island than the Forest of Arden must have colored the commute that January morning. Or, at the very least, surprise and curiosity about who had done this and how. All the while the quiet comedy of Burns and Seamus Heaney's tender rueing watching from just above the heads of commuters.

From the start, Poems on the Underground had the poetic resources to continue indefinitely. Its assets stretched far beyond Burns in the eighteenth century and Heaney in the twentieth. In theory, the poems could be changed daily, culled from thousands of years of poetry from cultures across the world. The program's realities, however, were a bit more limited. With their Arts Council grant and the cautious support of a few other umbrella organizations—the British Council among them—Poems on the Underground made a manageable compromise. Chernaik, Benson, and Herbert would select five or six poems every three months and switch the placards. After three years, in 1989, the LRT promised further support and took over financing—no longer charging for spaces and absorbing the cost of producing the posters. Most important, they quadrupled the number of placards. This meant that, at any given time, every train car carried at least one poem.

This broader assumption of economic responsibility by the London Underground emphasizes the program's success. As it had patronized the visual arts in the early twentieth century with its posters, the Underground was now patronizing poetry in an even less tendentious relationship. Unlike the earlier posters, these poems were not created with a promotional purpose. Though London poems appeared with regularity—which might be taken as a sort of PR campaign for the city—the vast majority of the poems dealt with what Chernaik calls the "Great subjects...love, death, war, the natural

world, time, memory" (100 15). Even the London poems—Ken Smith's "Encounter at St. Martin's" or Christopher Logue's "London Airport"—seem more preoccupied with "great subjects" than with drawing tourists to Madame Troussaud's.

While official support for the project grew, its greatest advocates were commuters. In the first year alone, Chernaik was getting calls almost daily with questions about poems that had appeared. Letters poured in. "Hundreds of people wrote in with queries about particular poems, suggestions of their own, and comments; many letters just said, in effect, "thank you, whoever you are, for the poems" (1991 14). There were even complaints according to the Economist, from commuters on the Piccadilly Line, where poetry was displaced by ads for duty-free whiskey ("Taking"). Some commuters liked the poems so much that they began to steal the posters from the carriages (Prokesch).

The program's founding assumption about poetry's liveliness—that "the pleasures of rhythm and rhyme are part of common life"—seems hard to refute (100 13). By 1989, poetry was a predictable part of London's everyday life. Its readers were noticing it, memorizing lines between stops on the subway, even stealing it. Verse beautified commutes and broadened its influence aboveground as well. A 1991 story in the Financial Times notes "a remarkable and unsuspected appetite for poetry among ordinary people" and Chernaik relates an anecdote about "The Leader" (poet Roger McGough's quasi-Silversteinian blurb about the problems of power) making its way from Tube into a handful of corporate boardrooms and political party headquarters as well as into newspaper political columns (Dodsworth 1991, Chernaik 1996). This impact was augmented by the appearance of the overrun of posters in British hospitals, community

centers, prisons, and libraries. In September of 1986, one selection—Wordsworth's "Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1803"—dragged twenty-five commuters out to Westminster Bridge on a rainy dawn to recite Wordsworth and poems of their own selection. Poems on the Underground also inaugurated a number of readings around London, including a marathon twelve-hour gathering involving over ninety people. This success also opened the doors for anthologies. 100 Poems on the Underground, first published in 1991, was a collection dedicated to allowing readers to retain or rediscover the "memory of a single line or image" lost among the clutter of the commute (100 Poems 16). It did remarkably well, selling in two years over 45,000 copies, an extremely high total for contemporary poetry ("Poetry"). The anthology has turned out new editions every year since, adding that year's poems. The anthologies have now sold, according to Chernaik, over 250,000 copies.

The success of Poems on the Underground in London cleared the way for other programs. In Ireland, a similar series started in 1987, and Paris inaugurated its own program for "*lecteurs-voyageurs*" in 1990. In subsequent years, hordes of imitators from Stockholm to Kyoto, Stuttgart to Vienna, and Melbourne to Moscow designed their own public transportation poetry projects. In the U.S., it began in New York. After eleven years, Poetry in Motion, the national organization that oversees the program, reaches more than 13 million commuters in fourteen cities every day. Commuter responses have been excellent, "almost alarmingly so," writes Chernaik (100 Poems 13).

By 1993 public transportation poetry projects had spread around the world and in London LRT was shelling out something more than £25,000 annually to support Poems

(Roberts 1993, Prokesch). A 1994 piece in the Independent shows, though querulously, the impact of Poems on the Underground. It begins

> Today is, as you can't have failed to notice, National Poetry Day. The nation is positively throbbing with anapests and trochees, rondeaus and villanelles. Poets will be reading at the National Theatre and going into schools, community centers and bookshops around the country. Poetry will be blasted over the PA system at Waterloo; pupils of Ashlyns School, Berkhamsted, will be handing out their own poems to commuters on the Berkhamsted-Euston line [...] Radio 3 will be broadcasting poetry all day. (Hanks)

Though the article wonders if poetry is just "enlarging its ghetto" or about to "break out of it altogether," the sheer catalogue of poetry events—many of them taking place on or around public transportation—is, for a dead art, overwhelming.

This success, by any measure, emphasizes poetry's vitality. But program organizers turned it into something more. This was a redemption story. "Once marginalized, poetry has become a surprising cultural feast that invites everyone to attend," writes Molly Peacock, who helped start Poetry in Motion in New York (15). Chernaik writes, "The truth, as we soon discovered, is that England is a nation of poetry-lovers" (100 Poems 14). These readers were enlivened by the poems that increasingly appeared in their everyday lives and poetry thrived on the apparent paradox that "poems seemed to take on a new and surprising life when they were removed from books and set amongst the adverts" (100 14). While this flood of optimism seems, perhaps, overdone,

the success of these programs cannot be doubted. People who would never have read poetry were daily coming face to face with it. Cities across the world were offering economic support and citizens were reading. Poems by defenders Sidney and Shelley appeared on trains. The isolation of poetry, so lamented in the twentieth century, was challenged if not made laughable by the appearance of poems in public transportation systems, one of the most democratic public spaces remaining in the culture.

four

With the help of the cultural space of subways, poetry in the mid-1980s seemed to have recaptured an audience. Rather than destroying the aesthetic life with everyday humdrum, these transportation systems were providing a place where poetry might meet its culture or, in the case of some poems, other cultures. Czeslaw Milosz's "And Yet the Books" has a particular relevance for Poland, but it appeared on the London Underground bringing both awareness of the troubles of Eastern Europe and—both implicitly and explicitly—pronouncing the universal power of literature. Some poems traveled an even greater distance. "Sleepless Nights" by Du Fu—a Chinese poet from the eighth century—appeared on the Paris Metro in 1993, providing a sense—even if it was insomniac—of continuity across cultures and epochs. While the ability of literature to transcend temporal and spatial boundaries is nothing new, the cumulative force behind this rush of poetry into the common life seems rather shocking. While the pulse of poetry had been reported as nonexistent for a very long time, it was suddenly flickering in the subterranean dim each day as poems presented themselves to a varied swath of readers

across the world. If poetry was dead, it certainly didn't appear so in the subway, and this liveliness inspired a new vigor aboveground as well.

All of this makes it remarkable that in the late 1980s and early 1990s, pronouncements of poetry's death flared up with an even greater intensity than they had since the heyday of Jarrell and Schwartz nearly half a century before. As praise appeared in the mainstream press and letters arrived daily for Judith Chernaik and other organizers, magazines from Commentary to The Atlantic and Critical Inquiry to Harper's published essays and responses from poets and critics announcing poetry's demise. In Vernon Shetley's book After the Death of Poetry (1993) the moribund state of poetry is so taken for granted that it is not even mentioned until the final paragraph of the introduction—and then in passing. In all of this noise, two essays drew a particular fervor.

In the summer of 1988—as poems by Dylan Thomas, Derek Walcott, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning decorated the Tube—Joseph Epstein, then the editor of The American Scholar, published the scathing "Who Killed Poetry?" which traces poetry's twentieth-century death with emphasis on professionalization. The teaching poet, Epstein argues, is "Like a true professional [...] rather insulated within the world of his fellow-professionals. The great majority of poets today live in an atmosphere almost entirely academic," writes Epstein. This insulation is troubling in itself, but Epstein sees it as a huge problem since the poets "are neither wholly academics nor wholly artists" (16). Publishing in university-sponsored magazines, teaching poetry to future poetry teachers in MFA programs, these poets lived an artistic life worse than simple isolation; they were insular. This academic womb was smothering contemporary poetry. It encouraged publication for publication's sake—producing countless poems read only by other career

poets and their students—and, in that spirit, general mediocrity. Contemporary poetry "flourishes," wrote Epstein in one of the essay's most blatant digs, "in a vacuum"(14).

Placed in an historical setting broader than the past century, though, Epstein's argument doesn't make much sense. If professionalized writing was the cause of poetry's great discontent, why had "poor poetry" been in such peril since Sidney or before, when poets were, by and large, gentry? Epstein avoids this question by placing the death of poetry around the middle of the twentieth century and never looking back.[6] But even this historical shortsightedness is somewhat tangential since the real goal of "Who Killed Poetry?" is to shift blame onto poets themselves.

Though it never gets around to finding out exactly who killed poetry, the title of Epstein's essay points towards a human culprit. Inspired, Epstein told me, by seeing two "vain" and "crappy" contemporary poets "so filled with themselves acting so lordly" at a reading of their "dreary poems," the essay pulls no punches. Though not quite so free with adjectives, in his essay Epstein writes that poetry is "smug and hopeless" and faults poets for neglecting their own culpability in the so-called death of poetry. Instead of realizing that they produce "something not many people outside the classroom want" poets "act as if those who do not appreciate what they do are, on the face of it, spiritually crippled" (20). This sociological analysis fits with other twentieth-century appraisals. Instead of making the marginalization of poetry complete, Epstein points out that it was valued in only one place: the college classroom. While this is really just another development in the long death of poetry, it was—for reasons not difficult to see—taken

[6] It is worth noting that in a minor tangent, Schwartz prefigured Epstein's argument by mentioning the potentially deleterious effects that teaching might have on poets.

by much of the poetry community as more than just another announcement of poetry's death. It was a personal attack.

Responses began to appear less than a year later. In Harper's poet Donald Hall's rebuke entitled "Death to the Death of Poetry" attacked the presumption that "it is universally agreed that no one reads it" (72). Hall, a professor at the University of Michigan, reduces Epstein's essay to "pure blurbtalk," and jibes that its author "saves time by remaining ignorant of the art he disparages" (72, 73). Hall was not alone in going after Epstein. Earlier that same year, the AWP Chronicle—a journal published predominately for creative writing teachers—opened another front that same year. AWP, which stands for Associated Writing Programs, was the party organ of the system Epstein was attacking, as the responses in its pages make clear. Starting in its May issue and trailing into subsequent months are replies to Epstein's piece written mostly by contemporary poets teaching at universities. These essays ranged from Charles Simic's one brief paragraph—indifferently asserting that "Most poetry of any age is no good" (though in so saying, Simic also manages to call Epstein "plain silly" and "an arrogant fool")—to the response of Askold Melnyczuk, editor of the journal Agni, which was long enough to include footnotes (14).

Few of the respondents were as quick as Simic in taking their personal digs at Epstein. He was called nostalgic, ignorant of contemporary poetry, and "unhappy, ungenerous, ungraceful, and useless" (7). Epstein had only "surface erudition," and his essay was "ponderous dirge" of the sort "especially worthless to a practicing artist" (9, 8, 11). Some respondents seemed to misinterpret willfully. According to one, Epstein's real desire was "a contemporary poetry that valorizes capitalist mythology, or, more

abstractly, a stable order with fixed ceremonious usages among fixed social strata embodied in traditional prosodies" (10). But most of the negative responses focused on witty name-calling and banner waving, ignoring, for the most part, that this sort of proselytizing was precisely what Epstein's essay set out to criticize.

Amid the predictable outpouring of repudiation, there was some praise. Poet Robert McDowell cites the argument's "general soundness" and another poet cries "Hurray for Joseph Epstein!" (8, 15). Though they lack the simplifying reactionary fervor of many of the negative retorts, most of the affirmative responses don't add much to the discussion. The longest one, though it is buried under the innocuous title "Response to Joseph Epstein," is deeply considered, searching, and engaged.

Its author was Dana Gioia, a poet and then-executive at General Foods. Gioia begins by regretfully agreeing with nearly all of Epstein's analysis (though it "hardly provides a complete view of the issues") and, over the course of his essay, domesticates the argument. While agreeing that poetry's place in the university has isolated and insulated the art, Gioia "would feel more accurate in blaming the Professor than the Poet-in-Residence" (14). This is one of Gioia's central diffusions; instead of blaming poets alone, he spreads the blame to everyone but the common reader. One of Gioia's particular peeves is reviewers, in whose work he finds "a clear pattern of institutionally employed poets exchanging public favors" and "puffing up their professional colleagues in print" (12). Gioia's conclusion praises Epstein's "frankness, intelligence, and wit," and, above all, the importance of the debate his essay has spurred (14). But this wasn't Gioia's last word.

Two years later, in the spring of 1991, The Atlantic published the best-known, later-day defense under the title "Can Poetry Matter?" The ranging essay is laced up in a peculiar optimism.[7] In spirit it is a longer version of Gioia's response from the AWP Chronicle and remains heavily reliant on Epstein, but the differences in perspective are clear from the opening paragraph:

> American Poetry now belongs to a subculture. No longer part of the mainstream of artistic and intellectual life, it has become the specialized occupation of a relatively small and isolated group. Little of the frenetic activity it generates ever reaches outside that closed group. [...] Like priests in a town of agnostics, [poets] still command a certain residual prestige.

Though the final simile seems biting—seeming to reject Shelley's spiritual claim that poets are "hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration" (297)—it is hardly brutal. In Gioia's opening, poets are active, but outdated; prestigious, but in name only. This travels more along the lines of Longfellow than Epstein. What Epstein calls a "vacuum," Gioia calls a "subculture" and on more subtle level, Gioia's poets are surrounded by agnostics—not atheists or Buddhists. Doubters that can be, it seems, converted.

Some of Gioia's hope probably comes from his knowledge. As someone more intimately involved than Epstein with poetry, Gioia was able to provide an insider's perspective on bizarre phenomena like the continued growth of the poetry industry—the ever-expanding number of poetry magazines, journals, and books published each year.

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[7] It was later republished in Poetry, emphasizing how important Gioia's essay was not only for the culture at large, but for the poetry 'subculture' as well.

He was also able to acknowledge good poets, though he admitted the search wasn't—in the wash of new publications—always easy. One would suspect that, as an insider, he was also aware of the developments in London and the plans underway for starting Poetry in Motion in New York, where he was living at the time.

Though more optimistic than Epstein's, Gioia's essay hardly dwells on these successes. Gioia again looks at the university, but from a very different perspective. The move "from Bohemia to bureaucracy," Gioia writes, not only "changed the social and economic identity of the poet from artist to educator" but stripped society of "the imagination and vitality that poets brought to public culture." Here, Gioia moves into the well-traveled territory of poetry as separate from the culture, but with a distinctive twist. Rather than leaving poetry destitute, this move had impoverished the culture. While Gioia unquestionably feels this shift has hurt poetry, he attempts to focus on the ways it has hurt the public culture. "The first," he writes, " involves the role of language in a free society." He makes the dubious claim that poetry keeps "the nation's language clear and honest" and suggests that the removal of poetry from public life is part of our current (indistinct) social malaise. The second reason is even more tautological. Poetry should matter to the culture at large because it "is not alone among the arts in its marginal position." Put simply, the problem with the marginalization of poetry is that it, like all other arts, is marginalized. So while dressing up his complaint in slightly different rhetoric, Gioia's point is an old one: the culture has been taken over by barbarians and poor poetry has fallen by the wayside.

Still, Gioia maintains his optimism until the end. The essay concludes with six potential remedies for the intellectual ghettoization of poetry. In these short paragraphs,

Gioia uses the word *public* four times and the phrases *general culture* or *general audience* twice. Even without looking at the specific remedies Gioia sets forth, it is clear that the way to resuscitate poetry is to relocate it within the culture at large.

Gioia's essay received more letters in response than any essay in Atlantic history. They included a number of unsurprisingly outraged replies from Creative Writing departments, but the majority were "overwhelmingly favorable." They came, writes Gioia, continuing to foist displacement away from poetry, from "isolated and disenfranchised" readers, "refugees...all of whom care passionately for poetry." These readers came from all walks of life and, according to Gioia, resented modernism and the university for taking away the poetry they loved. These readers feared an incipient spiritual loss for the culture if poetry remained in its ghetto.

The ways in which Gioia's essay distances itself from the death of poetry tradition are curious. The subtle displacement of poetry's isolation, the use of rosy statistics (the same ones that appeared, in various forms, in other Chronicle responses to Epstein), and the concluding remedies imbue "Can Poetry Matter?" with a lively feeling. The essay, though, is saturated with doubt from the start, which its questioning title emphasizes. Though Gioia plays the role of cheerleader with grace, the key to the essay's true genealogy is the assumption that underwrites its central thesis: the marginalization of poetry. Though Gioia's proclamation is modulated through some tinny notes of hope, it is saturated with the same fears apparent in other twentieth-century defenders. Despite their clear differences, "Who Killed Poetry?" and "Can Poetry Matter?" both believe, in Gioia's phrase, that "poetry has lost the confidence that it speaks to and for the general

culture." Both, in other words, fit comfortably into the twentieth-century tradition of defense as lamented death.

In fact, nearly all of the participants in this conflict subscribe fairly unflinchingly to this tradition. In the harshly optimistic responses to Epstein in AWP a lack of readership is taken as expected and unproblematic; it seems to be the natural state of poetry. One respondent, sounding very much like Gioia, writes that "Poetry must be made accessible to the common man" (10). The Politics of Poetic Form lecture series delivered in the fall of 1988 argued with vibrant optimism that poetry garnered political power. But in prefatory remarks the forum's organizers Charles Bernstein falls back on the same set of assumptions. Responding to those "who would insist that there are no longer 'public intellectuals' in America" he suggests that the problem is "that there is no public for its intellectuals, which means that a *republic* (of letters? of, as we now say, discourses?) needs to be found(ed), which is to say, *made*" (vii). The familiar move of blaming the public suggests a relationship with the death of poetry tradition, but even more telling is the forum's founding concern—"the (re)constitution of the public and the (re)construction of discourse" (vi). If it must be reconstituted and reconstructed (or constituted and constructed at all) the public and public discourse must be, like poetry, either non-existent or abased in its current form.

All of this reinforces just how important the sense of marginality was to poetry's self-image. Even while flying the flag of poetic health and success, both the optimists at the Politics of Poetic Form lectures and among the AWP respondents almost unilaterally confirm poetry's distance from the mainstream culture.

As they had throughout the twentieth century, the flurry of poetic defenses and death-notices in the late 1980s and early 1990s focused on the issue of isolation. The real development was the blaming of poets, but a tacit assumption of poetry's marginality still provides the basis for this discussion. Poetry remained separate from the culture. All of these commentators suggest that rehabilitation—by infusion of political force or simply by returning poetry to public life—might be possibile. Even Epstein stodgily concedes this point in his essay's closing, admitting "a darting glint" of good poetry appears "every once in awhile in the work of the better contemporary poets" (20).

But no one looks to Poems on the Underground or the myriad other public poetry projects as a way in which rehabilitation might be accomplished. Gioia doesn't mention them anywhere, not even in his closing suggestions. Epstein told me he had never heard of the program when he composed "Who Killed Poetry?" (He likened them to poetry slams which he doesn't find particularly "encouraging.") According to Charles Bernstein "simply putting the word out in public places for people to interact with is fundamental to [...] what the space of poetry can be" and in his lecture which concluded the "Politics of Poetic Form" series, he praises poetry as "a model for the individual political participation of each citizen" (236). Here, as in each of these defenses, there is no mention of poems on subways.

Reasons for this silence are not entirely easy to fathom. While for some—like the speakers at the Politics and Poetic Form lectures—the aesthetic of the subway poems might have been a problem, the refusal to acknowledge the poems by commentators like Epstein and Gioia is a little more difficult to fathom. In fact, Gioia's "modest proposals" for reinvigorating poetry might almost be written by the public transportation poetry

projects. For instance, he asks that poets giving public readings "should spend part of every program reciting other people's work." Though not oral, a multi-vocal presentation is precisely what the subway projects offer—as one particularly diverse selection from 1997 including Cavafy, Edith Södergran, Federico García Lorca, Alain Bosquet, and Primo Levi and Brecht, a selection that crosses times and places and ideologies, both poetic and political. Along with this diversity, Gioia advocates that anthologists be "scrupulously honest in including only poems they genuinely admire," which dovetails precisely with the ambitions of Chernaik and her comrades who select the poems in a method that is, as they describe it,

> purely pleasurable. [...] The selection of each new group follows weeks of digging through our own libraries and the great public collections [...]. We usually end up convincing ourselves that this particular set is the most accessible, most delightful in all possible ways.[8] (1996 20)

Furthering this correspondence, Gioia writes later that "The sheer joy of the art must be emphasized."[9] From the *pleasure* Chernaik notes in the selection process to the praise that percolates in responses to these projects, Gioia's focus on pleasure seems essential to these projects. All these correspondences, when combined with the public transportation poetry projects' success in reintegrating poetry into civic life, seem to suggest that Gioia

[8] This sounds a little like Chernaik's definition of Shelley's genius in her book The Lyrics of Shelley: the "openness to experience and to ideas" and the "restless, educated eclecticism" that is "unsystematic and cannot be reduced to formulas" (29).

[9] Gioia also writes that "Poems should be memorized, recited, and performed," something Poems on the Underground promoted from its inaugural day. The trains arrived twenty minutes late, but soon filled "with the sounds of happy poets declaiming verse by Shelley, Burns, and, of course, by themselves" (100 Poems 14).

would have had a hard time finding fault. Especially after 2001, when Poetry in Motion put his poem "Beware of Things in Duplicate" on trains—at exactly the same time as "Watch Repair" by Charles Simic, a particularly antagonistic respondents to Epstein in the AWP Chronicle.

Epstein's suggestions for reinvigorating poetry are more aesthetically specific than Gioia's and equally relevant to the scheme of these projects. After leveling his sociological criticism, he moves to define what he sees as the key form of contemporary poetry: the lyric.

> In practice, this means a shortish poem ... generally describing an incident or event or phenomenon of nature or work of art or relationship or emotion, in more or less distinguished language, the description often, though not always, yielding a slightly oblique insight. (19)

This Johnsonian definition carries a certain tongue-in-cheek bias, but one paragraph later Epstein really weighs in on the issue:

> [...] in taking up the lyric as its chief form, contemporary poetry has seriously delimited itself. It thereby gives away much that has always made literature an activity of primary significance; it gives away the power to tell stories, to report on how people live and have lived, to struggle for those larger truths about life... (19)

Here Epstein sides with Sidney, who discounted all types of poetry save the "*Heroicall,*" because the "loftie Image of such woorthies most enflameth the minde with desire to bee woorthie" (25).[10] The lyric, in Epstein's analysis, seems to—in its brevity and lack of narrative—make nothing happen. To support this claim, Epstein goes so far as to suggest that, although "fragmented and disjunctive," The Waste Land "tells a story" (19). Though he doesn't bother to make a case for this point, this turn in his argument gives some indication as to why he might not have been particularly interested in public transportation poetry projects in the first place.[11]

Epstein's definition of lyric fits most poems appearing on trains and busses. They are naturally short because of their display-space—the rectangular ad slots at the top of subway cars—and always involve some sort of piquant observation, a necessity since all are carefully considered "for [their] possible impact [...] where people may be exhausted and irritable or close to despair" ("Books"). The lyric seems to concern Epstein both because of its aesthetic limits (all it offers is *more or less distinguished language*) and its intellectual weight (*slightly oblique insight*; it lacks *much that has always made literature an activity of primary significance*). Despite this multi-faceted critique, however, in the essay's final moments Epstein complains that contemporary poetry hasn't been able "to plant language in my head the way that poets of an earlier generation could"—a claim he illustrates by quoting lines from lyrics by Yeats, Stevens, Frost, Eliot, cummings, Eliot

[10] In his catalogue of poetic styles, Sidney makes no mention at all of the lyric, though it seems most closely aligned with his pastoral or "*Elegiack,*" which "in a kind e heart would moove rather pittie then blame" (22).

[11] In his Literary Theory, Terry Eagleton summarizes the poem's "narrative" with rather comical results. Eliot's poem is "the story of a little girl who went on a sledge-ride with her uncle the archduke, changed sex a few times in London, got caught up in a hunt for the Holy Grail and ended up fishing glumly on the edge of an arid plain" (157).

again, Auden, Frost again, and Moore.[12] The "elegant, potent, lovely language" of Epstein's quotations is precisely the language that defines the public transportation poetry projects (20). In fact, many of the poems from which he quotes have been selections. The lines from Eliot appeared in New York subways in 1993 and other selections from Eliot have shown up in London and elsewhere. Yeats is a favorite of Poems on the Underground, appearing three times in London (less than only Blake and Shakespeare) and as part of the inaugural selection of Poetry in Motion in New York. Similarly, Auden and Stevens have been chosen both in London and New York and cummings has turned up in Paris and New York. Moore, the lone woman in Epstein's mini-canon, has been seen only in New York.

So while Epstein blames the lyric for separating poetry from the culture, he ends his essay with a rush of lyric lines. The contradiction is suggestive. Perhaps Epstein's argument against the lyric—as the most insular of forms—was simply too harmonious with his more general claims about poetry's insularity not to be included—despite the fact that the lyric is precisely what Epstein, as his examples indicate, loves.

On a basic level, the public transportation poetry projects embody the notion of a living poetry promoted by both "Who Killed Poetry?" and "Can Poetry Matter?" The truly remarkable fact about these essays, then, is not the changes they work on the death of poetry tradition, but that they—like many of their contemporaries—completely ignore the vital impact these projects were having on poetry's public life.

[12] Though the line—from "Poetry," the poem Epstein begins and ends with—is, in Moore's poem, an unsourced (and still untraced) quotation (Gregory 160 n.).

five

I've never been to Alaska but it makes a difference to me that it's there.

Charles Bernstein

In the winter of 1994 this poem appeared in the London Tube:

White as the heron's wing
the strokes the snow-capped peak of Mount Fuji,
but with a hole in the middle.

The poem's author was eighth-century Japanese poet Pim Li Ko. At the same time, this poem by Colin Dale was also gracing trains.

There's a hole in the sky,
if it gets bigger scientists say we'll fry,
or drown, or both.
There's a small hole in my mint,
but it's not nearly so dangerous.

These poems were not selected by Poems on the Underground, nor were they written by the authors to whom they were attributed. Behind the verses was JWT, a London advertising firm. The posters were ads produced for Polo Mints and came, according to London Transport, dangerously close to copyright infringement (Watkins).

A verse beginning: “Tyger, tyger burning bright/ On Esso forecourts in the night,” appeared in the spring of 2003. This time Greenpeace was responsible. They had pasted these lines and other versions of classic Poems on the Underground verses over current selections already in the Tube (“Poems”).

While amusing, these episodes highlight a precariously equivocal aspect of the public transportation poetry projects. While allowing poetry to reach a broad public with immediacy, the placement of the posters opens them to misunderstanding and abuse—both political and aesthetic. Poetry which, according to Chernaik, is inherently anti-corporate—she calls it “socialist, progressive, internationalist”—is being used to sell mints (“Tunnel”). And not just poetry, but bad poetry (or at least feeble parodies of good poetry). As one commentator has suggested, in the projects the poetry becomes both “a commodity and advertisement in and of itself” (Nadell 41). Poetry is present, not as it was in the old Tube posters, to advertise a place, but simply to advertise itself. Rather than providing the complex mixture of emotional resonance and intellectual engagement that poetry can offer a reader, it simply reminds travelers that poetry exists, is waiting to be purchased at Barnes & Noble just as soon as she gets off the train. This opens the way for such facile rip-offs as the Polo mint ads or the Greenpeace parodies.

This rash of copycat “poems” implies that these programs were not as purely revolutionary as their own literature suggests. Just like ads for toothpaste, they were, at least in part, offering a commodity. But, if imitation is flattery, these copycats also provides further evidence of just how successful the programs had been at integrating poetry into the public consciousness. One of the themes of the JWT mint campaign was Polo’s “topicality” (Watkins). Even if these precociously bad verses were being put to a

rather un-poetic use, it is significant that poetry—as it appeared on the Underground—qualified as "topicality" offers an emphatic redress to the assumptions that underwrite the death of poetry.

To praise these programs for bringing poetry back from a supposed precipice is to place them in an appropriate social context. In a number of cases, the programs do more than simply bring poetry to the public, they re-articulate and vitalize specific poems, amplifying their language and providing a particular potency. A striking example is Carl Sandburg's "Grass." An anti-war poem of the sort typically selected by Poems on the Underground to commemorate Remembrance Day in November, "Grass" was to appear in October 2001. In deference to feelings aroused by the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, it was pulled by the London Underground. Chernaik defended the importance of poetry as "witness to the times" but allowed that, after consideration, "it seemed clear that we couldn't have it on the Tube" ("Tunnel"). A month later, the poem did appear—though for a shortened stay.

"Grass" is a short poem that works around the refrain "I am the grass." Despite the forceful use of the refrain, and other similar repetitions, the poem is free of rhyme and its meter is uncertain. It moves across the page, lines breaking into ambiguity; historical epochs and atrocities—Austerlitz and Waterloo and, in the next stanza, Gettysburg, Ypres and Verdun—pile up against one another. Sandburg, typically considered to be the most reader-friendly of modernists, seems here to be in fully radical mode, and his refusal of traditional form offers an indictment of history. The poem ends with a sudden snatch of temporal narrative. Passengers on a train ask of the conductor:

What place is this?

Where are we now?

and receive only this answer—not, notably, from the conductor:

I am the grass.

Let me work.

The terseness of the response is shocking. After three consecutive lines of iambic dimeter, the unvaried emphasis of each word in the poem's last line implies a finity, but the work of grass is an infinite cycling. The grass's "answer"—both metrically and in its complete failure to answer the passenger's questions—suggests that violence will return—as, indeed, it did in September 2001. But the final lines also hum with the unflagging ignorance of place. Formally, they suggest the lack of communication between the world and its denizens, a disconnect between history and the present.

In the fall of 2001, the poem circumstantially carried an even more emphatic political force. The flap over whether it should have been shown is more than a simple disagreement over propriety. As a general commemoration—coinciding with Remembrance Day—Sandburg's poem is a reminder to be attentive, to recall what lies under the grass as we roll by in our trains. Colliding with the events of September 2001, the poem forces us to remember, with brutal compunction, the ways in which our curiosities are planted in sheer ignorance and our suffering is part of a string of suffering that cuts across time and place, across the predictabilities of language. In 2001, the

grass's refusal to answer is a cruel irony in the light of this poem's perfection as an explanation of why such brutality had occurred—and why it could occur again and again. While the historical context of that fall added something to the poem, its placement on the subway trains makes it an even more striking statement. "Grass" spoke directly to passengers who felt "vulnerable," as Chernaik acknowledged, with bio-terrorism "no longer a remote fantasy" ("Tunnel"). It also spoke for them. It acknowledged passengers who were riding trains to work on the morning of September 12 blithely reading the gossip pages without recognizing their culpability in the historical cycles of violence. It uses train passengers as a metaphor for social ignorance, and by appearing on a train, the poem seems to have brought to direct light exactly the kind of ignorance it was agitating against. The concerns that the poem was inappropriate for the Tube are grounded as much in its power to accuse riders as its power to shock them with the violence of its language. In the fall of 2001 "Grass" showed that poetry could matter. But it also proved that well-chosen poems in subways could speak even more eloquently than they might in anthologies or classrooms.

The public transportation poetry projects, then, work on a number of levels. They offer poetry to the public, and in doing so refute the century-old assumptions about poetry's moribund state. Because poetry did not speak to a public, it was dead. As these subway projects show, however, poetry had retained a public—the diverse public of subway-riders around the world. On subways and—because of their influence—increasingly aboveground, poetry could matter; whoever killed it did a less than complete job. These projects matter not just because they prove that poetry is there. They transcend this simple existential success because they have the power to revive specific poems by

locating them in a temporal and spatial moment where they can offer important and sometimes intense implications to their readers.

Implicitly, these projects refute the death of poetry thesis that underwrites so much contemporary lament; explicitly they can re-vitalize poems. While putting anything to such a public use opens it to misuse or co-optation—as in the Polo ads or Greenpeace's "guerilla marketing"—the benefits to poetry and to readers far outweigh the detriments; detriments, it's worth noticing, that no death of poetry critic has even bothered to mention.

Since 1986 poetry has been there and, as subway riders around the world are still testifying, it is alive. It matters.

six

I have seen two prints of Walker Evans's picture of the accordion player. The one I describe above is owned by the National Gallery in Washington. The other was printed in the first edition of Many Are Called.

For the print in the book, Evans shifts the accordion player more to the center of the frame. In this, the leading line of the rings, like many of the faces on the left edge is lost. More than the other, this print seems to push us towards the accordion player. But in the realignment, we also notice faces. One is a youngish man in a dark overcoat far down the car. He is looking back, towards the accordion player. Though the picture is blurry, he seems to be paying attention. Another is that of an old man completely absent from the other print. His fedora rests lightly on his head and the Times is thrown open before his

face. Though he can't see what's happening in the car, he seems to be smiling. The news, on that night in 1941, was probably not the cause.

That night most of the audience was undeniably looking away. But in this print, one can't help but focus on the dark spots of the accordion player's tightly closed eyes. Evans may have caught him in a moment of exhalation, or a blink, or a realization that the tin can hanging from his accordion is empty. But here he is in the middle of everything. The car is lit like a stage. He is in the middle of everything and he doesn't seem to notice.

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