The Tyranny of the Accessible

By Rod Jellema

Out in the wilds beyond lands inhabited by readers of journals like *Poet Lore*, there has always been a silent tribe of teachers and readers and nonreaders who dare not venture beyond what they call "accessible" poems. Their safest reading can be found in anthologies with titles like *Best Loved Poems* or *501 Poems of Courage and Inspiration*. Such anthologies protect them from confusions with strange or "difficult" poems. Some of us might view this attitude as a retreat into cheap-perfume sentimentality and easily memorized plink-a-plonk verse, but these people see themselves as upright conservators of real, no-nonsense, *direct* talk.

I want to say it is precisely the directness of poetry that frightens them off.

They plead directness, yet they ignore the kinds of word-play that make reading poetry a direct experience. Their mistake is to try to encapsulate the poem's theme, isolated from the wave motions of its language, assuming that a theme or message is mainly what any poem means to reveal. There is success and value in such teaching and reading, but I'm saying that it falls short, that wringing out the themes of Keats or Kinnell deprives us of experiencing these poets'—and our own—discoveries in and around those themes. And I see an easy way out of the dilemma.

But first, a stroll through the landscape of poetry as modified by this notion of "accessible meanings." Its advocates cut back to what is easily accessible to all of us, but mind-expanding to almost none. And without intending to, they make inaccessible much of what Matthew Arnold called "the best which has been thought and said in the world" from Homer on. All because they think poetry is by nature hard to access. Though it isn't.

This sheltered, withdrawn response to poems is just fine with large numbers of younger students who are sure that they do not like poetry anyway. They "understand" sentimental indulgence; they recognize in popular verse, and cannot find in last spring's *Poet Lore*, the twang in the plucked heartstrings found everywhere in the lyrics of their Top-40 music. If they must, they can fake an interest in obvious questions on a test. ("What does the clock in stanza two symbolize?") The student who thinks about maybe writing some poems to say how he feels wants them to be accessible—and so he employs the accessible models.

This popular demand for simple meanings is further strengthened by the mass media, notoriously out of touch with poets. Certain that it is too complex, the media ignore the poetry that could offer a good antidote to the mental Nembutal it dispenses 24/7.

I first got slapped awake to the tyranny of the accessible in high school. I'm a university professor emeritus of English who flunked high school sophomore English—twice. We students in the early 1940's were expected to tell Miss Pfisterer the "meanings" of the poems she assigned, and I surely muttered to myself that if my single-sentence *précis* said what William Cullen Bryant or James Whitcomb Riley had meant to say a century earlier, why hadn't he just said it? Why should I have to read how a poet gussied up and inflated what was perfectly clear, simple, and accessible? Take Bryant's "To a Waterfowl," for example. Three teachers in three years made me memorize and recite it. Its accessible meaning—that if the flying waterfowl is divinely guided, then surely we are—is entirely clear. But look at just the opening lines and you wonder if this accessibility-waxing-poetic is a factor worth the trouble.

> *Whither, midst falling dew,*
> *While glow the heavens with the last steps of day,*
> *Far, through their rosy depths, dost thou pursue*
> *Thy solitary way?*

The title is where the trouble begins. Waterfowl? If Bryant had called it "To a Duck," all the pseudo-poetic verbiage would not have arisen. His lines are not the way a human should talk to a duck. Better might be (I still think):

> *Hey duck! Where you goin'*
> *all alone*
> *into that dewy red sunset?*

Here's the point: when accessibility is the big criterion, poets can ignore all the other resources that reside in words. (Had Bryant read Whitman or Browning?) In a vain effort to keep poems "higher" than prose, they write grandiose, stilted, inflated ones. The puffery is there to make the accessible seem "poetic." Back then, I disliked poetry as thoroughly as the next braggart. No wonder.

Twenty-five years later, when I was teaching literature and just beginning(at age 40) to write poetry, the situation had become healthier. Older modernists like Eliot and Stevens and W.C. Williams, who had galvanized and revitalized poetry, were now established and venerated; younger masters (Lowell, Rukeyser, Roethke, Bishop, Wilbur) and even the "deep image" poets like Robert Bly and James Wright, who were my contemporaries, were getting through to some of my students. The Beat poets were in the public eye. The wide popularity of poetry readings—a new phenomenon—may have moved many poets to compose more with their ears and less with conventional literary baggage. (Public readings tempted many other poets into the louder but weaker forms of rhetoric and oratory, and later, poetry slams and rap. But that's only a different flight chart out of the same airport.)

In spite of all these changes, the walls of some schools and libraries and bookstores still reverberated with the proud echoes of "normal" people lamenting poetry's loss of accessibility. Many English teachers, certified by methodology courses but not by the study of literature, continued to play it safe by clinging to the accessible.

Elsewhere, the uncertainty about how to read poems, made *au courant* by the deconstructionists in Academia, shifted the approach to “personal interpretation,” it being agreed that anyone’s interpretation was as good as anyone else’s. This approach sank quickly and, I hope, disappeared. (Why would anyone write a poem if it is allowed everyone’s authority except its own? Wouldn’t a number of interpretations of one poem finally render that poem inaccessible?)

Modernist and contemporary poems, breaking through to newer readers with the immediacy of paintings, cinema, and music, were for some an awakening and a different way to write and read; for others they only made the problem worse. (Emily Dickinson was hard enough—but Auden?) The split between old and new had become even more pronounced by the 80’s. If the newer poems were not obvious and accessible, you could make them so, in Billy Collins’s phrase, by tying them up and beating them with a hose until they confessed.

The proliferation of MFA writing programs at the universities is often blamed for a dominant kind of elitist obscurantism—and often praised for swelling the number of poets. Both observations are true. Confession: I have paid little attention. To paraphrase what the farmer said to Samuel Johnson about philosophy: I tried to study these efforts, but joy kept breaking in.

All the fuss about what poems are, and what they are for, gets further muddied if, to make poems more accessible, editors and teachers and some poets themselves declare that poets write only to “express themselves,” and that their poems are almost always about their “personal experience.” Hey, Shakespeare never supped with Cleopatra or Hamlet. And think about this: to express is what you do when you squeeze the tube of toothpaste onto your toothbrush. You express it. All of it if you’re really expressing. We know people who do this with their emotions; whatever we think of them, we do not think they are enhancing our lives with art. Treating poetry as self-revelation steers us into analyzing poets instead of responding to poems. But transforming experience, even personal experience, into full and evocative art goes far beyond mere self expression. The confessional poets in the 60’s took us into psychological currents, history, and mythic realities that lie far beneath the surface, yet remain accessible. “I don’t write a poem to express an experience,” says Irish poet Eavan Boland, “I write it to experience the experience.” Sylvia Plath would agree.

“To experience an experience” is to get a second and fuller hold on it. Poets as artists are more than audiovisual recording devices; they *render* experience. They are not more detached and more sensitive than other people; the difference is in that second look. For all his fury and sublimity, Yeats’s first drafts could be limp and stillborn; the experiences come into fullness as poets like Yeats continued the creative process of making them. Poets are conduits of the human imagination, which urgently shares the shapes of what it sees, thinks, hears, touches, dreams, and makes—simultaneously.

That second look as it becomes a poem may discover links to history or ideas, or to a growing theme. Most importantly, it catches images or associations that do not occur to us as we hurry along past our first look. Even the cadences and sounds and timbre of voice that are part of the poem’s body will come into it.

Thus created, a poem aims directly to strike the whole you, not just your "understanding" but you as a fully human receptor: quick to all five senses, to images rising up from beneath consciousness, to reason, to sounds that words combine to make, to undertones and overtones, to contrasts and juxtapositions. Therein lies the experience that the message-hunters miss. The impact is immediate; it is a glee that poets and readers can share. That is, there is no need for the mediation of the intellect. Poems *work*. Directly.

Oddly, those writers, teachers, and readers who cling to a narrow definition of the accessible, hungry for meaning while fearing to trust verbal sounds, flashes, and leaps, deprive themselves of the electric immediacy of poetry. They work at building what poetry never intends: a prose statement that says the same thing as the poem, supported by instructions for identifying the tools and machinery (forms, sound patterns, tricks of the trade). Poetry is a whole life richer than that. Poetry is experience made whole.

In the Spring-Summer 2013 issue of *Poet Lore*, Katherine E. Young reviews *Corpse Whale* by dg nanouk okpik, a poet whose work is infuse with borrowings from her native language, Inupiat. Young praises the poems for their "interplay of word and white space, and the throat song of inner meaning . . . their multiplicities and contradictions . . . their collapsing perspectives and inner resources." Now, that's what I'm talkin' 'bout.

The working out of creative process can be, and sometimes wonderfully is, the arrival at an entirely new level of consciousness. Call it mind altering: poets ride the process to see things in "the light that never was on sea or land" (Wordsworth). Using a multi-dimensional language that resonates beyond prose, they sometimes get to "music heard so deeply / That it is not heard at all, but you are the music / While the music lasts" (T. S. Eliot). Leaving tracks poets make for readers to follow, poetry makes such discoveries accessible. Directly.

Each poem that survives its own process of being made beckons the reader, too, into another look. And if the object of attention is no longer like what you, as reader, are accustomed to—if your view of two ponies in a darkening field is nothing like James Wright's—well, that's the point. It has been transformed to a different wattage. See his poem "A Blessing." Each poem does its work, which is to make for us an experience, a direct one, rather than a borrowed one that is paraphrased or exulted over or explained away in shortened lines of prose.

The pleasure is in finding that the poem is by its nature accessible.