

December Song: The Ordeal of Poetry in a Secularizing Society

by [Samuel Hux](#) (April 2019)



Poetry, Lawrence Alma-Tadema, 1879

Can Poetry Matter? So asked Dana Gioia almost thirty years ago. I reviewed his book then, respectfully—a rave in fact. Today I would force myself to say yes, it *can* matter, but that right now it *does not* matter and *will not* as long as the mainstream literary world has its way. This is a unique cultural moment: it used to be expected that a cultured person who was not a lover of verse would have, nonetheless, at least some small familiarity with the dominant poetry of his time, and not to have it would indicate a radically compromised degree of cultivation—but, now, ours may be the first literate age in which a lack of familiarity with or concern for the poetry of the moment could instead be considered a mark of a person’s discernment, a radical good cultural sense. I need to disburden myself of some despairing thoughts. I also need a certain permission (indulgence?) from the reader that I may—as the Bard said—“by indirection find directions out.”

Readers of Saul Bellow know what he meant by “short views.” Those short-hand, cryptic, suggestive mini-essays on matters of consequence embedded in the frantically expansive fictions. The focused and precise insights penetrating the no-holds-barred flights of narrative energy characteristic of the rhythm of thought of his novels. But the champion of the short and chiseled must be the German playwright and poet August Stramm, killed in the 1915 bloodbath.

One of Stramm’s more curious of his very curious poems is “*Schwermut*”—Melancholy. The title seems inadequate for what the poem says, or rather, says *now*, after the experiences of the century to follow, which made 1914-1918 seem almost like practice.

Schreiten Streben

Leben sehnt

Schauern Stehen

Blicke suchen

Sterben wächst

Das Kommen

Schreit!

Tief

Stummen

Wir.

Verbs used as nouns. Nouns which look like verbs. An adjective (*Stummen*) which looks like a verb, or a noun. A sense of being and doing artfully confused. All of which I try to suggest with this translation. "Striding. Striving. / Life yearns. / Shuddering. Standing. / Looks seek. / Dying grows. / The Coming / Shrieks! / Deeply / Mute / We."

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Striding and *Striving*, *Shuddering* and *Standing* do not modify adverbially or adjectivally as they might appear to do in English—as I try to indicate with the periodic punctuation of the English that Stramm does not need in his German (since the capitalization designates those words as nouns and nothing

else). *Not* the sense of “while striding and striving life yearns.” Rather, the words are isolate: states of being almost crippled. Human movement is almost motionless, furtive, pitiful: “Life yearns” and “Looks seek”. . . *something*. What really moves is catastrophe, death: “*Sterben wächst*,” and the vague *Coming* (of death, but of more) screams! In our deep recesses we are left frozen. Mute. *Stummen*.

When I first saw this poem it, like *Das Kommen*, almost shrieked, “silent” though the poem is. It stunned me. And that is very strange, for my German is quite limited, school-boy German which never reached the level of conversational comfort. Odd, then, that a poem so speaks across a linguistic awkwardness. I can understand how Randall Jarrell could love the German he barely knew, as Hannah Arendt recalled him (*Men in Dark Times*). Not a week passes that I do not think of Paul Celan’s *Todesfuge*: “*Der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland*.” I wish I knew German better. But it’s good and right that a poem can bridge a linguistic fault, given what German became a quarter century after Stramm’s death and in time to wound Celan: words dissociated from meaning, *Endlösung* and *Sonderbehandlung*—“final solution” and “special treatment”—not meaning some metaphysics of the ultimate and a fine etiquette, but murder; and words obscenely direct, such as *judenrein*, “cleansed of Jews.”

Sterben (to die, dying) is really fine, better than *Tod* (death). *Tod* is an event that happens; *Sterben* is something we do. And it does grow in our time—*wächst*. It’s one of our biggest enterprises, as Bellow might have said. Odd to think of Bellow, with that exuberant, expansive style (he could never have composed a “*Schwermut*”), as our poet of death, but he was that, funny-sad or tragic. Tombstones are “postage stamps Death has licked” (*Henderson the Rain King*). Recall the

funeral scene in *Seize the Day*, or Moses Herzog writing letters to the dead, or Artur Sammler (*Mr. Sammler's Planet*) a Lazarus.

Bellow's *The Dean's December* when it was published (1982) was, to my mind, the least satisfying since the first, *Dangling Man*, which is to say it is a cut above the work of the ordinary good novelist. It has not fared well critically, and not just because that street-urchin-Great-Books style had been relatively muted and the book was as eventless as a plot can be. The book almost invited the proper-thinking to be offended—most specifically by one of its recurrent “short views.” The inner-city, crime-suffering, mostly non-white, unemployed population is “on the fast track for death,” is “meant to die,” is “a people consigned to destruction, a doomed people.” Chicago's resident apocalyptic Toquevillean could expect a critical *Genickschuss* (imagine Lueger at nape of neck) as the mod Left assumed that Bellow was blaming the victim. He wasn't, but . . . well it's hard to say.

America is “not itself securely attached to life just now.” We are “whirling people,” a culture of “outsiders without insides.” What am I talking, the Dean wonders, “Metaphysics? Epistemology? What?” (I suspect in some sense Religion.) “We do not know how to approach this population. We haven't even conceived that reaching it may be a problem. So there's nothing but death before it . . . Those that can be advanced into the middle class, let them be advanced. The rest? Well, we do our best by them. We don't have to do any more. They kill some of us. Mostly they kill themselves . . .” How to characterize this short view? Truth, or merely neurasthenic, apocalyptic, “artistic” indulgence? Or is it an extraordinarily brave enterprise of thinking the worst that we can think as a kind of prophylactic against the worst that we

can think?

Rest assured that I don't really imagine some silent to passive conspiracy / complicity toward a state *lumpenrein* (I'm only trying to assault the reader's attention). But if it were even conceivable that we have turned some corner and are resignedly about to rely on our biggest enterprise, Death, as a social mechanism, this would be a large matter to consider. But one question is: would Bellow's language help us consider or would it only deaden perceptions? I suspect that many who would say the latter beg the question that the social lingo we normally use does *not* deaden perceptions. Talk about the "culture of poverty" for instance. Not a "culture," says the Dean, "only a wilderness, and damned monstrous too." I think the Dean is right that the more respectable language, "underclass," "anomie of the lumpenproletariat," etc., blinds us. For bureaucratese (*Amtsprache*) like "economically redundant people" is too much like the language that Stramm's countrymen learned to speak. Let's face it, social-scientese is not a lovely tongue.

A friend once asked in a public venue a naïve-profound question—why doesn't poetry change the world?—and the knowing crowd was speechless, embarrassed by the naïveté and deaf to the profundity. We have here a matter of different languages: "poetry" and—what shall we call it?—*Amtsprache*, bureaucratese, academese, programmatic talk? For reasons which may become clearer later I'm going to settle on *secularese*.

Well, as poetry historically preceded the social sciences it is the language which most closely approximates the way we actually experience reality: for all its artfulness it remains closer to the primitive rhythms of human awareness. Its

cónsequéntial cádencés are not mere frills; they are essential. It is arguable that a society deaf to poetry has no experience, only the stuff of it. Programmatic talk, secularese, is at best what we use to describe what we should *do* about the given reality. But when we think its terminology describes our experience of reality, when we think that some of us are “economically redundant” instead of “on the fast track for death,” then social confusion waxes and cultural death threatens.

I seem to have wandered, willy, nilly, into the precincts of death. What I intended was a commentary, montage-like, on Stramm and certain associations his poetry, his poetic form, necessitates for me. August Stramm, *Hauptmann* (Captain) Stramm of the Prussian army, survived dozens of battles and received an Iron Cross before dying in hand-to-hand combat at Horodec in Galicia, April 1915. It is tempting (I yield) to believe “*Schwermut*” was penned shortly before Horodec. In any case, his fame, such as it is, was pretty much posthumous: he produced several plays before the war but little poetry, a few poems in an expressionist journal in 1914. He has never been a household name even for Germans; if he is mentioned in the company of Stefan George, Rainer Maria Rilke, Georg Trakl, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Gottfried Benn, it is probably as an afterthought. And I know no book of his poems in English—although there is a generous selection in Tim Cross’s anthology of Great War victims, *The Lost Voices of World War I*, and translations by Alistair Noon can be found on-line, although I am surprised that the poem I have translated above is not among them. Once again: *Schreiten Streben / Leben sehnt / Schauern Stehen / Blicke suchen / Sterben wächst / Das Kommen / Schreit! / Tief / Stummen / Wir.*

What a careful composition! Not only are verbs used as

nouns–*Schreiten* (the gerund “striding”). These verbs also remain verbs–*Schreiten* (the infinitive “to stride”)–and a German would probably hear what we can’t, both gerund and infinitive at once. Not only do nouns look like verbs–*Leben* (“life”); they are at the same time verbs–*Leben* (“to live”). And there are other verbs available to mean “shrieks”–*kreischt* for instance from *kreischen*; but *schreit* from *schreien* “reminds” the ear of *Schreiten*. (Unless ears have memory there is no poetry.) And given the fact that in German the *sch* is equivalent to English *sh*, and the fact that initial *s* before *t* (as in *Streben*, *Stehen*, *Sterben*, and *Stummen*) is pronounced *sh*, the poem “*Schwermut*” is in a precisely real sense imitating the muteness it says death’s coming commands, by way of that universal admonitory verbal gesture, SSSHHH!

One would not say the poem rhymes, exactly; yet, actually, it does. Those two-syllable nouns, verbs, noun-verbs, and an adjective–those trochaic feet (DUM-ta)–have a soft *unaccented* “rhyme” in the second syllable. *Schreiten*en, *Streben*en, *Leben*en, *Stehen*en, *Suchen*en, *Sterben*en, *Kommen*en, *Stummen*: the second syllables drive the poem. (Technically in prosody all rhymes must occur in *accented* syllables.) And the trochaic pattern is violated so to say by the monosyllabic *sehnt*, *wächst*, *Schreit*, *Tief*, and *Wir*–so that if one misses the solemn rhythmicality of “*Schwermut*” one should be ashamed to admit it. In any case, the poem rhymes–and yet doesn’t; the poem does not rhyme–and yet does. And given what the poem is “about,” any less solemn rhythm would seem a blasphemy.

Stramm’s little masterpiece puts me in mind (associations necessitated) of another poem, although what they share is not immediately obvious, Evelyn Hooven’s “[Morning Song](#),” in *New English Review*, July 2016. (The poems published in *NER*, by the way, are generally far superior to those chosen for the

excessively with-it *Poetry* sponsored by the Poetry Foundation, once the greatest poetry journal in the Anglosphere but now an aesthetic disgrace.)

Waking, crossing
This threshold
While you sleep there,
In plain November hunger,
Gloom or candid glare,
Something is missing.

Last week's singing
Holds no longer.
Neither oblique gold
Nor garlands here.
Oh I have wished all year
For what's astonishing.

Note not simply the participle-like *-ing* words—for who can write English without the participial forms?—but the way the forms are used. They begin the poem, its first stanza—*Waking* and *crossing*—and close the first stanza—*Something* and *missing*. They end the second stanza's first line—*singing*—and make the final appearance of the poem—*astonishing*. And although the unaccented syllables of these mostly trochaic feet in English do not technically rhyme (any more than Stramm's *-ens* do),

here they do. One simply cannot read aloud “Waking, crossing” and “Something is missing” without the technically *unstressed* –ings not sounding more prominently to the ear than the technically stressed *wake-*, *cross-*, *some-*, and *miss-*. And this slender humming in the ear carries over to the *singing* of the second stanza and to the astonishing *astonishing* which closes the poem and stuns the reader.

Of course there are exact rhymes as there are not (but for *Streben* and *Leben*) in “*Schwermut*”–*hold* and *gold*, *there* and *glare*, *here* and *year*, and one approximate rhyme, *hunger* and *longer*–so that there is no single line that does not rhyme with another. But the rhymes do not fall into a predictable pattern: –*hold/gold* and *hunger/longer* falling in separate stanzas, *there/glare* separated by intervening line, *here/year* making a couplet. So the poem clearly rhymes, and in another sense doesn’t, if you’ll take my meaning.

Indulge my fascination with meter–“pacing,” it ought to be called, or so recognized. Most of the lines are either trochaic (DUM-ta) or iambic (ta-DUM) or a combination of the two, which means roughly every other syllable stressed–which itself gives an pronouncedly elegant pace; the total impression is beautifully musical, consistent with the mood of loss and disappointment the poem conveys, that mood “imitated” to a degree by the *lingering* (read that again, slowly), the lingering –*ing* endings which like hope slowly fade without definitive closure.

Or take another Hooven poem, [“Chant for a Lover”](#)

I cradled him in moss one day,
A chill, a moment! He was gone,
A phantom took my love away,
A ghost has cast him into stone.

Fireflies dance their light away,
Dead bones stir in lands unknown,
A phantom bore my love away,
A ghost has wrought him into stone.

Absolute regularity of rhyme: ABAB, ABAB. Absolute metrical regularity in stanza one: iambic tetrameter. Near metrical regularity in stanza two, with spondees (DUM-DUM) introducing first and second lines: *Fireflies* and *Dead bones*. Altogether a more traditional, perhaps predictable, form than have "Morning Song" and "*Schwermut*." Yet all three are citizen poems in the same republic of *poetry as a musical genre* nearing extinction.

All three are exceptionally "careful" compositions, compressed in form and all the more volatile for that, apparently clear with the sort of clarity one knows signals depths of mystery ("The Coming / Shrieks!"); all three employ the traditional values of rhyme, metricality, alternation of regularities and irregularities. As T.S. Eliot once said, "I gotta use words when I talk to you," so I need a short-hand to suggest all those values . . . and a bit more. Real poetry, true poetry, requires a certain formal indirection, a "use of language . . . deliberately and ostentatiously different from talk," as W.H. Auden said when characterizing poetry as a "rite." But to

seize upon “ritualistic” as my word would be too misleading, and would be an unintentional gift to those people—mostly and obsessively *secularist*—who don’t want poetry to be “different from talk.” Sir Herbert Read in his memoirs confessed that the paraphraseable meaning of poetry had never been the most important aspect for him: “From the beginning I was content with the *incantation* of a poem, and I still maintain that this is the quality essential to poetry” (italics added).

The “incantatory” is really not bad at all, if we note that “incantation” means not only a magical chanting, a spell, but as Webster’s reminds us, “*repetitious* words used to heighten an effect.” The italics are mine, but I would add not only *repetition* of words, but of sounds and rhythms, as in Shelley’s “by the incantation of this verse” (“Ode to the West Wind”). So: *Incantatory*.

But I should not pretend that I am just now discovering this thought. Is it kosher to quote oneself? I don’t see why not. Should one toot only a borrowed horn? “Doubtless the secularizing of society is a positive thing,” I wrote several years ago. (I’m not sure I’d say that now.) “But the total secularization of the *world*? For ‘secular’ need not imply merely the disestablishment of the ecclesiastical: it can imply the absence of the mysterious, the magical, the wonder-demanding non-cashable suggestive in the most quotidian aspects of life.” And “*The poet has traditionally been one who stood in the way of the secularizing of the world’s body, the mere engineering of it, so to speak. His chosen job was to know that the richness of the world does not respond to barked commands, that it reveals something of itself only after respectful entreaties, oblique strategies (as any quantum physicist knows!), charms, so to say. This required a certain formal indirection . . .*”

Yes, charms: incantation, the formal indirection that such poetic values as rhymes and/or rhythm and alternating regularities and irregularities provide. So, all three poems I have reproduced are *incantatory*.

But to call them, as I have, “careful compositions” is potentially misleading. So understand that I don’t mean “fully planned.” I mean the poets just compose out of their own aesthetic inner necessities, without fully conscious imposition at least not all the time, and what they compose cannot help but be incantatory. And now one other thing: the poems are not quite paraphraseable; they can only be *repeated*.

But it is clear that the virtues of these three poems, by these two relatively unknown poets—neither one a household name—are not now, in the poetry and critical sub-culture, broadly cherished, a sub-culture which to its own dishonor has little use for *cónsequéntial cádecés*. If this were not the case, how could the following disgraceful phenomenon occur?

The winning entry for the first annual (2010) Stanley Kunitz Memorial Prize had *none* of these values, was graced by *no* poetic virtues. Not incantatory in the least, no way, not at all. The judges should have been ashamed to make Kunitz turn over in his grave. The first line is the title, or the title rather, separated in the text, serves as the first line.

Another Thing I’d Rather Not Know About Myself

Is what a good soldier I’d make. A man

and woman come into the coffee shop
and talk about the dinner party menu
like it's the divorce settlement. I watch
them sit down, each ready to write
and argue, and he suggests jambalaya
and she says she's okay with that
to which he says *you don't sound okay
with that* and to answer she only asks
how it's spelled so she can type the decision
into her laptop, finally . . .

Brendan Gill once reviewed a film by summarizing the first few minutes and concluding, "I hope the rest of the movie turned out all right."

I refrain from giving the name of the lady who won the prize. A gentleman could do no less: I do not wish to embarrass her in public. The Kunitz committee has already done that, as well as the editors of *The American Poetry Review*, who published the poem, as prominently as possible, on the back cover (Sept/Oct '10). Such publication is no more incidental than the prize award itself: if one were looking for a symbol of the contemporary American poetry establishment—its judgments, preferences, standards, aesthetic definitions; its canon-making capabilities—one could do no better than single out *APR*.

I defy anyone to tell me how "Another Thing I'd Rather Not Know About Myself" differs at all from simply barely competent prose, the quality of language you would use if you were explaining to someone, somewhat unintelligently, things about yourself you'd prefer not to know. It only *looks* like (does not sound like, sing like) a poem, lineated as it is. To make an effort in its direction I might note that each line has on average ten syllables (actually eight to thirteen) so that its formal requirement is traditional syllable-count as in some old odes. But, hell—give me a break—I could lineate the essay I'm writing into ten-syllable lines and call it a "critical ode" or some such! Another thing about "Another Thing": it is entirely paraphraseable—because it reads quite simply *like* a paraphrase, a prose paraphrase.

If the Kunitz-winner's entry seems to some a poem—as circumstances dictate that it must seem—it is because it strikes some as so *normal*: which says much about the judgments, preferences, standards, aesthetic definitions that currently corrupt the enterprise of "poetry." It must be the case that the lie Karl Shapiro suggested years ago (in a book entitled—confessionally?—*In Defense of Ignorance*), still has currency, that there is no essential difference between poetry and prose.

"It must be the case," and there's no way around it, it *is* the case. The late C.K. Williams's *Wait* falls conveniently to hand—a highly rewarded poet, Williams, with a Pulitzer and two hands full of other prizes to go with his Princeton sinecure: verily, an expensively-clothed emperor. Daisy Fried's rave in *The Threepenny Review* graduates to a blurb which enthuses, somewhat incoherently, that Williams's work is "so written, so little like writing." Not so; it is very much "like writing." For instance: "In a book in the fifties the then-famous Jesuit

scientist Teilhard de Chardin posited a theory that puts me in mind of: a bubble around the earth, a 'noosphere' he called it, consisting of all the yearnings, prayers, pleas, entreaties of humans for something beyond—he meant God of course, Christ—toward which he thought the universe was evolving." That's a couple of stanzas from "Halo." I leave it up to the reader to supply the slashes (/) to indicate where lines end and begin, but I assure anyone it will have no effect on how one reads the passage. ("Incanting" it is out of the question.) The "stanzas" have no more poetic value than the Kunitz-winning selection, although I admit I prefer reading the Williams *paragraph* because the slightest mention of Teilhard is more interesting than jambalaya.

It must say something about the poetry sub-culture (notice I do not write *poetic* sub-culture) that Williams was much more respected, admired, and rewarded in the literary world than the incalculably more talented Dana Gioia. It is not simply that Gioia is a serious Roman Catholic of the old stamp—although that doesn't help in a sub-culture secular in its bones. Nor is it simply that Gioia's political conservatism cannot be ignored in a sub-culture where illiberal liberalism is a secular faith—Gioia did after all serve as head of the National Endowment for the Arts under Bush II. Rather, the trouble is that something like the following—"So much of what we live goes on inside— / The diaries of grief, the tongue-tied aches / Of unacknowledged love are no less real / For having passed unsaid. What we conceal / Is always more than what we dare confide. / Think of the letters that we write our dead"—that something like Gioia's "Unsaid," if *heard*, will never be mistaken for prose. Or perhaps I am mistaken: I am not sure that most of our mainstream *literati* can *hear*.

Just a matter of taste? Well, no, as a matter of fact. I refuse to think that this is nothing more than the poet's freedom to choose a style that is suitable to his purposes, an exercise of artistic freedom. It is something a great deal more important than that, something that no one should congratulate himself upon ("I'm an artist and I go my own way!"), something instead that bespeaks an extraordinary degree of arrogance, selfishness, and blind (and deaf!) disrespect for the art form that the self-congratulator preens himself upon practicing. For although he may write things he calls poems, poetry itself—or better, *poetry-in-itself*—does not belong to him. *Does not belong to him.* It predates him by centuries and, unless he succeeds to kill it, will be here long after he's gone. And—a point I shall pursue a bit later on—whatever the single poet's intention, poetry-in-itself has "a mind of its own" accumulated over the centuries of its existence, has its own intentions. And it makes a demand upon the single poet that's not always met, that he pursue the craft with the same pain and care that Emily Dickinson expended—metaphorically—on her household chores: "Ample make this Bed— / Make this Bed with Awe—." And in so far as he avoids the awe, consumed by his own self-indulgent pride in "going his own way," then poetry-in-itself is a *trust* that he violates. Let me pursue an analogy.

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Roman Catholicism has the most demanding theology of the Christian denominations, or so it seems to this somewhat lapsed Episcopalian. So I could generate a degree of sympathy for the Catholic who has some problems with some of the items

of Roman doctrine (the existence of Purgatory, let us say, or the Marian intercession, or the even circumscribed view of papal infallibility, or you-name-it). I would never insist anyone be a hundred-percent subscriber, for perhaps the tension between the need for orthodoxy and the distrust of orthodoxy is a wired habit of the human mind. (And Pope Benedict XVI wrote a book on the respect-worthy dialectic of faith and doubt.) But notice I call this believer "who has some problems" a *Catholic* nonetheless (even if possibly a "bad" one?). But I would not be so charitable if he did the following: protested that the ornate Catholic ritual behavior for communicants—crossing oneself, genuflecting, beating of the heart, "mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa"—should be retired in favor of a more Protestant-style relaxed demeanor; if he demanded that the ritualistic priestly behavior "on stage" be scrapped to make the principal Sabbath activity a tell-it-like-it-is sermon with sizzle and pop; if he theorized (with pop-sociological sophistication) that the priesthood / laity division should be reduced to Protestant dimensions, for if priests dressed more or less as we do, and introduced us to their wives or significant others, the church would be oh such a more sociable place; and so on. My logic? A certain doctrinal flexibility is a fact of Catholic life: after all there are already Pelagian or semi-Pelagian currents (roughly speaking) competing with Augustinian or Jansenist ones within the history of the church (no matter that Jansenism was declared a heresy in 1653); some Catholic hearts beat to Pauline soteriological rhythms and some to Jamesian, and so forth. But if you significantly change the ritualistic way the church goes about the practice of communal worship, you change that which gives the Roman Catholic Church its unique *catholic* nature, that which makes Catholic worship recognizably the same no matter where one is on earth whether one is worshipping among communicants who think St. Paul makes most sense or who are sure St. James does. I am talking of course about a ritualistic *language(!)*, both gestural and verbal. If our fellow wishes to dispense with all this I think he should

depart himself and call himself a Protestant for clarity's sake for Christ's sake. End of analogy.

Most American literati would be offended by an association of poetry with a religion, any religion, even when the association takes the form of an innocent analogy. ("Innocent," hah!) That's too bad—for I must offend much more seriously.

Dana Gioia in his essay "The Catholic Writer Today" (*First Things*, December 2013) explores the paradox that although Roman Catholicism is by far the most populous denomination in the States today it is hard to find any self-identified Catholic writers (poets, dramatists, novelists), either those who practice the faith or having fallen away to some degree remain "cultural" Catholics. This despite the fact that fifty, sixty, years ago the Catholic writer was a prominent citizen of the republic of letters, whether Catholic-born like Flannery O'Connor or J.F. Powers, or converts like Allen Tate. (Mine is an economical list, Gioia's much richer.) This scarcity is good neither for American literature—more insistently and near-exclusively secular every year and more intolerant of the religious sense—nor for the church itself, more aesthetically boring every year, unappreciative of the fact that "The loss of the aesthetic sensibility in the Church has weakened its ability to make its call heard to the world"; for "Dante and Hopkins, Mozart and Palestrina, Michelangelo and El Greco, Bramante and Gaudí, have brought more souls to God than all the preachers of Texas."

My view is consistent with Gioia's, but differently weighted. I suspect—I would bet my soul on it—that it is no accident that the paucity of poets actively alive to the aesthetic

traditions of churches graced with a sacramental and ritualistic life-blood (Roman Catholic not excluding Episcopal), or alive to any denomination for which creation is not mere calculable molecules but is a divine gift to be reverently celebrated. . . it is no accident that this sad state of affairs is co-existent with the prosaic linguistic banality that passes as poetry in our mainstream literary precincts. The liturgies of the church—whether we're talking about the language of prayer and celebration or the physical ritualistic behavior of the communicants—were a kind of music, either musical language or a kind of musicality incarnate in simple or elaborate gesture, a kind of choreography as it were. Take this away . . . or throw this away (a more exact way to put it), and . . . need I finish this sentence? Taking another tack: Try to imagine literature in English un nourished by the rhythms and cadences, the simple elegance and the breath-taking elevations, the astonishing *poetry* of the King James Version of the Bible . . . and what would you have? The wasteland that constitutes the vast majority acreage of the contemporary American republic of poetry—that's what.

The writer claiming the poet's mantle may write *about* whatever he wishes—Teilhard, menus, whatever; he may take any "position" he likes—conservateur, revolutionary, his choice. I'm easy. It's a free country. But if he writes the same kind of writing that *I* can write, that *most of us* can write, then he has given up or avoided-through-lack-of-talent that small-catholic language of consequential cadences, of poetry, recognized as such over centuries and across cultures and linguistic faults, which traditionally has given pleasure and a great deal else to the cadence-hungry human race. He, to satisfy himself, violates the *trust* one assumes responsibility for when one lays claim to the title "poet"; and to lay claim to some degree of honesty he should admit that he is what *I and most people who write* know we are, prose-writers. Should

he protest that “You don’t understand; I write free verse, which you seem not to grasp is *poetry!*”—then I would answer as patiently as possible, “You don’t understand; to write free verse and have it come out poetry requires more than intention; it requires *genius*—and neither the Kunitz- winner, C.K. Williams, nor probably you, is a genius.”

The late Sherwin Nuland. M.D.—“Shep” to his friends (I never met him, but without him this essay would never have been thought of)—was no garden-variety med-school professor: author not only of texts such as *Origins of Anesthesia* and *Doctors: The Biography of Medicine*, but *Maimonides* and *Leonardo de Vinci* as well . . . and *How We Die*. Yes, how indeed. I heard Nuland speak in New Haven in 2004 as a member of a panel on “Beginnings and Endings: where do we come from, why are we here and where are we going?” One of his speculations was about the hope for an afterlife as an impetus for religious belief (yes we all know that), and along the way he quoted the poet John Hollander to the effect that all languages have two tongues, the everyday and the poetic. Yes, we all know that as well?

No, wait: myself, I would correct Hollander. Modern English—at least—has three tongues: the poetic, the everyday, and *secularese*. The latter—call it what you will—tends to invade the precincts of the everyday and drive out ordinary speech. Fewer and fewer people nowadays have *problems*