

The Noble Art Is Not So Noble

by David Solway

The signs of the degenerative disease that has struck the West are everywhere to be seen. They are indeed so numerous that, although they are in full view, they have become almost invisible. The symptoms of moral, cultural, and political decay have become part of the very air we breathe, prompting us to consider as normal what is patently abnormal and to grow oblivious to the climate of decline we now inhabit. Inflammatory issues are reported in the news—riots, jihadist attacks—but remain for the most part unrelated in the public mind to the vast tectonic shift taking place.

But if we pay attention, the indices of pervasive decadence across the board—the absence of intelligence, courage, common sense, ordinary decency, skill and competence—cannot be doubted. Whether it is encroaching statism, corrupt journalism, third-wave feminism, the academic betrayal of its educating mandate, the gender war against natural biology, escalating racial tensions, redistributive economics, judicial activism and faux “[social justice](#)” legislation, a reinvigorated anti-Semitism, the plague of political correctness, and the now-customary exaltation of feeling over thought—the writing is on the wall.

The writing is also on the page. In my own lifelong discipline, the craft of poetry, I have noticed, at any rate among English language poets, that the general quality of what was once regarded as the “noble art”—so defined by Sir Philip Sidney in his [The Defence of Poesie](#) and in the pseudonymous [Letters of Junius](#)—has deteriorated to the level of parochial inconsequence, much of it either fashionably obscure or portentously insignificant, or both.

For some time now, I have received the “poem of the week” from

a UK poetry publisher that bills itself as the largest in the world. Some of these poems are the work of established figures—[John Ashbery](#), [Les Murray](#), [Louise Gluck](#)—while others pour in from an unending cascade of entry hopefuls, all hyped to the skies and practically all completely ephemeral. When I peruse the last one hundred such items in my folder, I can honestly say that only three or four were reasonably comprehensible or demonstrated some degree of verbal competence, apt phrasing, and a unique perspective on experience.

Poetry, to be sure, is no longer a popular art, appealing now merely to the tiny minority of the cognoscenti, but it nevertheless remains a cultural marker. It functions as a barometer of the times, often initially adversarial in mode and content, and as a preserver of linguistic caliber. When it falters and grows culturally mimetic, it violates its ancestral mandate while revealing the decline it both mirrors and participates in. Smarmy self-indulgence combined with inscrutable or undistinguished language is as reliable a sign of cultural marasmus as we can detect in any other field. It is also no surprise that the majority of poetic practitioners appear to embrace the progressivist ethos of the day.

When poets, who presumably know the history of the noble art and who plume themselves on a special dispensation of creative talent, deep-bred individuality, and cognitive acuity, present themselves as ideological nitwits, political ignoramuses, sanctimonious upholders of the debased norms of the era, and purveyors of clichés and banalities couched in smudgy and ecdysial language, then we know the culture is sick and faces a long and arduous road to recovery.

Poetry is not “[the noble art of losing face](#),” as in Danish poet Piet Hein’s witty little [Grooks](#), but the noble art of gaining legitimate cultural stature and authority. Poets were once understood as the custodians of language and provisional arbiters of cultural taste, forging (in the positive sense)

what James Joyce in [*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*](#) called “the uncreated conscience of [the] race.” Regrettably, at least since the hormonal sixties, poets have tended to become run-of-the-mill apologists for the status quo, and it shows in their work.

There are, of course, exceptions. To cite a diminishing number of impressive names among contemporaries, [Billy Collins](#), [Eric Ormsby](#), [Bill Coyle](#), and [Kei Miller](#) are poets of perception with a gift for aphoristic phrasing and the cadenced line, and the recognition that poetry is a complex craft of social import with a rich history of usages, principles, and genres, like painting or music. And despite differences in temperament, characteristic idiom, and structural form, they have something interesting and meaningful to say. But such originals are few and far between. The general rule is prosaic insipidity.

Occasional readers of poetry may observe the degradation of taste most clearly in the presidential selection of Inaugural poets, an intermittent tradition started by John Kennedy, who as a pioneer showed genuine discernment in his choice of [Robert Frost](#), widely celebrated for his homespun eloquence, earworm lines, and patriotic fervor. “[The Gift Outright](#)” is a cameo masterpiece. But this was an anomaly. [Maya Angelou](#) who read for Bill Clinton and [Elizabeth Alexander](#) at Barack Obama’s first inauguration should have caused any intelligent person to cringe in dismay. Saccharine verbiage and repetitive abstraction do not a poem make. Unlike Frost, these are poets who cannot be *memorized*, whose lines do not glitter in recollection or hang on one’s lips, let alone burin into the cultural archive. In comparison to his immediate precursors, Obama’s 2009 poet [Richard Blanco](#) is capable of long-distance endurance, but riffing in many gangling stanzas on his predecessor [Miller Williams](#)’ totally forgettable “[Of History and Hope](#),” he was super careful to be sentimentally inoffensive, a defection from true afflatus good poets have

always avoided. One recalls [Fred Piegowski's](#) "Inaugural" squib, printed in the *Los Angeles Times* for January 21, 2001, which ends:

No right wing poet could they find

All poets were of the other kind.

Jimmy Carter made the only sane decision of his entire presidency in choosing [James Dickey](#)—but Dickey, who pointedly did not attend the swearing-in ceremony, may have belatedly thought better of the whole affair. Dickey's prudently "experimental" contribution, "[The Strength of Fields](#)," was not particularly disastrous but not especially radiant, a somewhat clotted performance rescued by a strong, understated last line: "*My life belongs to the world. I will do what I can.*" Admittedly, Inaugural poems, like most poems written for an occasion, are almost invariably mediocre, but this does not change the fact that, on the whole, contemporary poets resemble contemporary presidents—people who should be doing something else.

The low state of poetry in public estimation is a sure index of a general lack of cultivation, especially in a tweeting culture addicted to sparring acerbics in 140 characters, including spaces and punctuation. Tweets are not haikus where resonant insights can exfoliate in brief compass. Pace [T.S. Eliot](#) in [The Hollow Men](#): This is the way the world ends/Not with a bang but a twitter. But the low state of current poetry itself, given over mainly to triviality, flabby sentiment, pedestrian diction, or cryptic utterance, is an infallible litmus of cultural degradation.

To paraphrase Andrew Breitbart, culture is downstream of

language. Language is now chiefly typified by evasion, flatness, and gobbledygook, the default position of most contemporary verse. “Language mediates behavior,” writes political author [Ilana Mercer](#). “To be invested in linguistic accuracy is to be invested in the truth.” One can say something similar about linguistic beauty, about respect for the intrinsic loveliness of language handled with flair and aplomb, maximizing its expressive potential. This is the hallmark of good poetry. But when the language and sensibility of the noble art goes south, we know we are living in the far north. In effect, the last bastion has been breached.

W.B. Yeats, one of the major poets in the Western tradition, concluded his magisterial poem “[The Municipal Gallery Revisited](#),” a tribute to the great souls who “said and sang,” with the famous couplet:

Think where man’s glory most begins and ends

And say my glory was I had such friends.

He could not have written this today.

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