

FULCRUM DEBATE

JOAN HOULIHAN, CHRIS STROFFOLINO

Joan Houlihan: Chris, hello. I'd like to start by talking about a neglected figure in contemporary poetry—the reader. Judging from the emails I've received (over 400 so far) in response to my series of articles, *The Boston Comment*, I'd have to construct a disappointed, disaffected reader of contemporary poetry. The audience for poetry isn't huge to begin with, but it's obviously there (the Best American Poetry collections do well enough) and it's not only poets who read poetry. This disappointment jibes with what I perceive as the inaccessibility of much contemporary poetry, the sense of being excluded, intentionally or not, by the poet. Why would a poet exclude a reader? Perhaps it's because the creative act and the resultant text, rather than how the poem is received, that are paramount in the poet's hierarchy of importance. This harkens back to the notion that the poet is not a communicator, but a seer, and that the effort to communicate debases the poem. It is instead an instance of the poet talking to him or herself and being "overheard." In any case, many readers are unhappy with what they are overhearing, either because there's too much mumbling or because it's only *too* clear—and banal, not worth the effort. Another source of disappointment is the nearly complete disappearance of rhyme, meter, evocative imagery, of a sense of rich meaning and "heart," or of a sense of humanity, if you will. There's often no one there, no construction of a self that the reader can identify with. I may or may not have the same taste in poetry that my readers have, but I tend to agree with their overall perception of being shut out. And this from someone who studies, writes, reads, and teaches poetry and also works as a poetry editor.

Chris Stroffolino: I don't think I can construct a notion of a reader of poetry in general (much less of contemporary poetry in particular) but I do think that many (if not *quite* all) readers of what's called contemporary poetry think of themselves as writers of contemporary poetry (and they can usually find others to "confirm" that). This may ultimately account for the feeling of being shut out of which you write (which, as a reader of contemporary poetry, I also feel). It's not so much that "the reader" is excluded by the person who writes what is deemed a legitimate, publishable poem by the various proper editors and gate keepers of an "art" that is often understood these days as variously elite or marginalized. Rather, the conception of the reader is localized, narrowed, specialized to the point where the identification, the sense of shared humanity, becomes eclipsed by a sense of a specific publisher's taste.

Thus, those who wish to publish their writings as poems are encouraged

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to discover and follow fashions in contemporary poetry (while concurrently also trying to convince themselves that they are not merely working within a “period style”) while receiving negative reinforcement for writing in other styles (I’ve seen many of “the best minds”—or hearts and souls, if you will—”of my generation” have both end-stopped rhyming verse and Beat-like “rawness” practically beaten out of them). There may be a “wide range” of choices on the legitimate menu, but even a wider range of exclusions. People who wish to be called poets are encouraged to look up to the top of a pyramid, toward the publisher rather than toward a “layperson” or even their own “heart.” This state of affairs may sound bleak if a writer of poems would like, or needs, at least some of his or her work to communicate with people who don’t write poetry, but even within these confines one may hope that one can discover a way to write that both passes for poetry among the various “schools” or “committees” without having to sacrifice accessibility to a reader or listener not similarly indoctrinated into the various “poets only” clubs, in which many poets apparently take pleasure (or to which they at any rate resign themselves to).

Yet, even with this hope, the writer still has to grapple with the fact that it’s difficult—regardless of the accessibility of the poem in itself—to find readers of poetry who are not themselves poets without having first “done time,” as it were, among readers who call themselves poets (and have the resume to prove it!). Surely one is free to try to bypass this process if one feels strongly that she or he has something to communicate and that this matters more than the obsessions over stylistic differences (which monopolize most contemporary “definitions” of poetry, perhaps even *because* there is no shared consensus). But in order to do this, the writer may have to be willing to stop thinking of himself or herself as a poet (which for most contemporary poets means what used to be called a “poet’s poet”) in order to communicate to and from humanity and the heart. One may have to avoid fraternization with other poets (as Whitman claimed and Dickinson did) and risk writing what will be called “bad poetry” by most, and maybe all, the prevailing literary standards of the day. But of course, in hindsight, there is much more of a shared consensus about the poetic greatness of Dickinson and Whitman than there is regarding any contemporary poet. This leads me to wonder more about the role of the critic (as distinct from both the “publisher” and the “reader”) so I think I’ll end this response with this question: If we hold communication as a value (as both of us do), what do we make of those non-poet readers who communicate and identify with the self constructed in, say, a Jimmy Carter or Jewel poem? Should we try to gently convince them that they are naïve or even wrong for not appreciating the stylistically subtleties of, say, a Dorianne Laux or Emily Dickinson poem?

JH: I think the distinction you make between non-poet readers and readers

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who are poets themselves is irrelevant to the quality of a poem or its communicative value. All readers of poetry deserve access to the best, therefore, all readers must be informed, and not necessarily so gently, that there are aesthetic differences that are not simply a matter of taste or subjectivity. This is the role of education. Students deserve this education. Jewel, *et. al.* may be a good way to access a student's ability or desire to read poetry, but this is simply a step toward being able to read the real stuff. Taste should not be confused with standards—some poems are better than others, better written, deeper, more effective in use of craft, etc. These elements can and should be determined and taught.

Furthermore, I don't entirely agree with your point that the exclusion of the reader is driven by marketing factors, that it is the publisher's taste that produces a kind of cascade effect whereby poets end up writing in certain ways to satisfy a perceived fashion in contemporary poetry. Language itself has fashions: it changes to reflect new words and modes of discourse all the time. The poetry of an era necessarily reflects the language of that era (the fashion of that era, if you will). For example, although Dickinson and Whitman both wrote original, breakthrough, poetry we can still locate them within their time period. They were just writing better poetry than their contemporaries. Therefore, I think the problem we're discussing, the lack of communication (and I define this very broadly, as I'm sure you do, as we must, in relation to poetry), rests squarely with the poet and the poet's inability to go beyond fashion, to use the language of his or her time in original ways that are also meaningful to the reader. Poets are left behind, or overlooked, or under-recognized for lots of reasons and not always, or even usually, because they are doing something startlingly original, but because they decidedly are not. The many good and valid reasons why poets should not be read more than once, if at all, include not being very good, or writing "in costume," in some other era's forms and styles, or having nothing new or meaningful to offer. What's happened as a result of Dickinson, Whitman, *et. al.*—the ignored geniuses (and were they really *totally* ignored?), is that the poetry world has built a false connection between a poet's being overlooked and being too brilliant to be appreciated by their contemporaries. Because in some cases, historically, the great poets were unappreciated, the logic is this: to be great you must be *unable* to be appreciated, that difficulty in being understood equals unrecognized genius. In reality, many more poets were overlooked for the simple reason that they deserved to be: the poetry was bad. So we now have readers who, in order not to be the historical dope, become instead the contemporary dupe, pretending something bad is actually something good. *Because* they can't understand it. The less understandable it is, the better it must be. This false logic is often reinforced by experimental, avant-garde and language poets who return the reader's bafflement with implied or stated rejoinders that basically blame the reader who looks for "traditional"

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meaning (already the newspeak begins, the meaning of the word meaning itself becomes politicized) is simply a philistine, someone without the historical view of how new art is rejected. This sort of rejoinder loses its power when it's made to well-read, open-minded, intelligent readers. The point is that I don't run into many poets today who are difficult and profound, but many who are just difficult. Jorie Graham is an obvious example, the later Ashbery, the sisters Howe, the language poets, the avant-gardists, and so on, and at least 50 percent, probably more, of the new books of poetry that get sent to me for possible review in *Perihelion*. I would grab a few lines from a random one here, but don't want to inadvertently raise ire again (as I did in my most recent essay on the post-avant garde) by focusing on some random poet/poem. I just can't think of any line in a contemporary poem that I would spend an hour on, though some lines seem to demand such attention. In fact, there is no reward for the attention since the difficulty arises not from profound thinking but from badly constructed, nonsensical lines, poor grammatical usage, or transparent attempts to "mystify."

So it's here, where the poem is held up as a political object, that the reader must closely look at the actual product and not listen to the claims made about it. This is not a publishing issue, it's between the poet and the reader, and it goes to the heart of the poet's ability to write and of the reader's ability to appreciate.

I think your point that someone (a publisher) has the power to declare someone a poet by publishing his or her work is a valid one, though I think the declaration that one is a poet is an inward and difficult declaration made first to oneself. A publisher gives the poet access to a career in the teaching field by giving him or her publication credentials. The influence on an individual's poems may be great, as you suggest, especially since it has to do with survival. Perhaps the poetry publishers have replaced the patronage system.

CS: Thanks for your response. The most significant tension I locate in your formulation is between what you call "the quality of a poem" and "its communicative value." At first, I thought you meant that these two things were one and the same, but on further observation it's clear to me that you mean them as two separate values.

JH: That's true, I think. "Quality" and "communication" could be seen as separate values, though it's hard for me to imagine a poem of great quality that doesn't also have high communicative value. Rather than separate, perhaps it's best to think of them as complementary, or even better, of communicative value as being one of a subset of values that adds to (or subtracts from) the overall quality of a poem, others being things like deft use of language, original imagery, etc.

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CS: In some of your *Boston Comment* pieces, you criticize poems by Billy Collins, James Tate, Philip Levine, etc., on the grounds of “quality” rather than on the grounds of their “communicative value,” a value these poems may in fact possess far more than other poems you might consider to be of superior quality.

JH: Yes, the criticism is about quality in regard to late Levine, late Tate and some Collins. However, communicative value is certainly high in Collins and Levine, at least. I think you are talking about two different essays here, one on the decline of some poets’ work, (“The Argument for Silence”) which certainly deals with the issue of quality, and the other (“If Only We Couldn’t Understand Them”) on the communicative value of some poets’ work. The latter points out that communication isn’t an asset to the poem when the meaning to be communicated turns out to be cliched or shallow.

CS: That being the case, how do you navigate this tension between “quality” and “communication”? Do you have a particular standard formula for the perfect balance between these two elements? Or can or do you, as a critic or a reader, accept a poem as good even if it errs on the side of “communication” or on the side of “quality”?

JH: I don’t have any standard formula—I doubt that anyone does—since we’re talking about poetry not math or science. Reading a poem necessarily engages the reader in some tensions, the suspension of understanding, for example. Reading a poem requires a lot of flexibility, the ability to revise interpretations as you read, sift and balance conflicting ideas, reach a working hypothesis and discard it, and so on. There is a mystery, and this is part of the tension—a pleasureable one. And the more poetry you read, the more familiar you become with strategies and the less able to be surprised, so you look for something more difficult than say, Jewel, in order to achieve that pleasureable tension between meaning and seeking. Of course, I’m leaving out all the important parts about the pleasure of the journey, how the language is constructed, the sensuousness of diction, the appeal of a particular subject matter, the force of an individual voice, etc. But I want to finally arrive somewhere, and I think this is a desire of most readers of poetry. To have this desire deliberately and constantly thwarted compels me to ask why would a reader seek out such a frustrating experience, read poetry that induces displeasure through obfuscation or incompetent writing?

Finally, I’m not sure I understand your question about accepting a poem as good even if it errs on the side of either communication or quality. There are lots of poems that are good, or at least good enough to read once. In fact, that’s what we have the most of, we’re swimming in them. Of course, I prefer great poems, don’t you? But accept as good, sure. I accept a lot of poems as good,

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and as a teacher and editor, I am happy to see poems that are on their way to being good, because out of something good may come something great.

CS: Joan—I don't doubt that we could come to some agreement over the greatness of certain poems (whether canonical or not), and maybe even value the same things in some of them. I, too, have come to find pleasure in the suspensions of understandings, the balancings of conflicting ideas, images, symbols, the working out of metaphorical logics, as well as questions of diction, subject matter, voice, etc—all the various tensions that often characterize difficult poetry. At the same time, I don't, or can't, always equate great poetry with difficult, complex, "well-wrought" poetry.

One thing that initially attracted me to complex poetry (a good deal of Marianne Moore or Wallace Stevens, for instance) was the way such poetry almost forces my attention to slow down to the point where I may spend more time than what's considered usual thinking about one line in a poem before being able to move on and consider how the line works in terms of the poem as a whole. At times I may not even come to an understanding of the whole poem, but this may not always be so important if aspects of it focused my attention as a reader, and furnished me with some "tool" by which I may come to a more profound understanding of consciousness, language, myself, or the world. As a reader (if not a critic), then, I often value poems that are generative and shock me into some awareness. My appreciation of the poem—as a product—can only grow once I step back from the process of getting "lost in it" to notice how other aspects of it work together. I know that for me there are more than enough of these superbly crafted, yet also personally inspirational or generative, poems in my library to last me a lifetime of re-reading. Thus, as a reader, I do not lament the lack of great poetry. Yet, I would never claim, as W. H. Auden has, that Marianne Moore, is a poet "I can read on any day and in any mood." For me, no poet, however great, achieves that

It's at times like these when I find myself as a reader lamenting the lack of something like the Shakespearian Fool to come in and save us, at least temporarily, from the suffocating demands of "difficult poetry." Or, lacking the option of the noble profession of the fool (which helped Shakespeare create a dramatic poetry that was far more inclusive than, say, most of Donne), I find myself reconsidering the value of poetry that is often, in the current poetic climate, de-valued as merely "beat," "didactic," or otherwise lacking in subtlety or difficulty (not to mention Jewel—I regret ever having brought her up!). Surely some of this poetry is not good enough to read more than once, but I don't think we can talk about the exclusion of the reader or the lack of communicative value that exists in much contemporary poetry without at least noting that the Beat poets helped create a larger audience for a kind of poetry that *can* withstand repeated readings. Coming of age during a time when

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such poets as Corso, Baraka, and Frank O'Hara were often placed in anthologies alongside of James Merrill, Elizabeth Bishop and Richard Hugo, and seeing these various poetic options (the so-called "raw" vs. the so-called "cooked") in dialogue with each other, and then looking at the current lack of such dialogue or debate today (as both the "language poet/experimental/avant garde" and the so-called "mainstream" equally tend to dismiss the "raw"), I can't help but think that this may play a large part in why the reader (or some readers) feel(s) so excluded today.

JH: I agree that great poetry does not necessarily equate to "difficult, complex" poetry—the apparently simple language and straightforwardness of a Robert Frost or a James Wright disproves that idea—but I disagree with you about "well-wrought" since I believe craft plays a huge part in the quality of a poem and its claims to greatness. Of course, it's always harder to talk about what makes a poem succeed, or attain greatness since a great poem is a singular occurrence, a one-of-a-kind, and when the poem has succeeded, it's like a magic trick. We enjoy and are swept into the illusion because it works; it's only when it fails and the mechanics are exposed that we want to examine it, talk about it, find out what went wrong. (By "well-wrought" you may mean "over-wrought," in which case I agree.)

Unlike you, as a reader and lover of poetry I do lament the lack of great poetry, am saddened, actually, by the lack of contemporary poems that move me at all. For example, two of the biggest figures in contemporary poetry, Ashbery and Graham, exhibit a tremendous virtuosity in language and (in Ashbery's case) sheer originality of line construction. His poems are adventures, they are exciting experiments (at least for the first half of his career). But the large concerns, the human themes that are always with us, are not given much credence in these poems: these are not poems that are meant to touch or elicit anything deep from a reader. They are more like performances on paper with the spotlight on the poet, not the human condition. I don't believe that language facility, style and voice unmarried to some larger, fundamentally human, concerns can ever be considered "great." Although, in both of these cases, we can find some work early on in their careers that made such aspirations, sometimes succeeding, as I noted in my essay "The Argument for Silence," those aspirations disappear, along with their best work, later.

About the "raw" and the "cooked:" I was looking at an anthology from the 70s the other day (*Open Poetry*) when there was a lot of experimentation going on—this included John Cage next to Bill Knott, next to the concrete and found poetry sections, also Bernstein, Diane Wakowski, Russell Edson, etc. The experimental poetry in it was not very different in form from much of what is termed "experimental" today.

Also, to your point:

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It was in Lowell's acceptance speech (National Book Award, 1960) that he expounded his notion (with a nod to Claude Lévi-Strauss) of the "raw" and the "cooked." Lowell distinguished between the symbolic, formally restrained, carefully reasoned poetry championed by the New Criticism on the one hand, and the fervor and associative logic of a new personalized poetic on the other. For Lowell, poetry had fallen into a staid, overly decorous kind of expression, into which his rough emotionalism and expanded subject matter were meant to inject new life. —*From the National Book Awards Acceptance Speeches, Robert Lowell, 1960 (For "Life Studies")*

By 1982, those unknown broadside and "little mag" poets Robert Creeley and Robert Duncan, Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder, had become nothing if not "respectable." And although some of the "Postmoderns" (say, the difficult Jackson Mac Low and the challenging Jerome Rothenberg) continued to be excluded from the mainstream anthologies and the Norton Anthologies of Poetry, others, notably John Ashbery, were winning all the Establishment prizes. Indeed, by 1982, there was no longer a clear line of demarcation between the raw and the cooked, the oppositional and the established, the "experimental" and the "safe." Metrics-as-such was no longer a differentium because everyone was writing free verse. —*Marjorie Perloff, "Whose New American Poetry?: Anthologizing in the Nineties" from Electronic Poetry Center*

I don't think the division now is "mainstream" vs. "experimental," since all good poetry is experimental—what poet could possibly consider themselves to be writing "mainstream" poetry? Isn't every poem an experiment? A poet by nature is anti-mainstream! In my opinion, the exclusion of the reader comes from a lack of poetry that connects to the larger concerns, the human condition.

CS: I think I agree with you about the irrelevance of the umbrella terms "mainstream" and "experimental" today (names of poets—for instance, your mentioning of Frost and Wright and my mentioning of Stevens and Moore—may ultimately be a more useful "shorthand" for anyone interested in mapping the very balkanized field of poetry). But I do feel that the terms "raw" and "cooked" connote and denote (however insufficiently) a different division than is often denoted by "experimental" and "mainstream." However silly those words are, they express and emphasize a different tension as a differentium; one that often gets lost in the discussions about "mainstream" and "experimental" that still persist today.¹

While the debates between the "raw" and the "cooked" were still in the air in 1982–3, when I took my first classes in (20TH-Century) poetry, Perloff is largely right about that time. In both Ellman and O'Clair's *Norton Anthology* (1972), assigned for the "Modern" class, and the Poulin anthology (3RD Edition), assigned for the "contemporary" class, writers such as Ginsberg and Creeley were presented as no less "respectable" than Bishop, Wright, Rich, Merwin, etc. If anything, they had the added benefit of being able to speak to

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the concerns of “youth culture” (by appearing in such dynamically seductive poet movies as “Poetry in Motion” for instance) or other aspects of humanity that may have been excluded before the “Great Society” helped open up colleges to a larger demographic in terms of class, race, gender. It was a time in which didactic poetry, like that of 1970s feminists Marge Piercy or Judy Grahn, was taught by Woolf scholars, and in which “high-culture” and “counter-culture” seemed to find a way to work together, connected to a wider sense of the human condition than was readily available in the official media of radio, TV, during the first years of the “Reagan revolution.”

Yet, Perloff’s argument, however true for 1982, became less true, at least in my experience of “history.” On a personal historical “*literaria autobiographica*” level, I went through a very long phase where I thought I *outgrew* these poets—but on a cultural level I also became aware that some of these writers who, for me, were some of the highlights of these first two anthologies (Jones/Baraka, Corso, Koch, for instance) were subsequently removed, and replaced with writers who—although not necessarily less “experimental” (and even, in some cases, more akin to those “difficult” and “challenging” writers Perloff mentioned)—were definitely less “raw,” less *warm*, less immediately accessible to a student who had not yet developed a taste for high, difficult, canonical poetry, a student who, in high school, might have been so convinced (and righteously sure) that Bob Dylan or Joni Mitchell were more profound than force-fed Frost or Shakespeare (in part because of the way the latter were taught).²

Thus, when I look at what has happened since 1982, it becomes clear to me that there has been a gradual diminishment of acceptance—or even tolerance for—the “raw” (if not for the “experimental”—in the sense of Graham or Ashbery). The “free verse” that Perloff claims had invalidated metrics as a differentium is still largely the norm (despite the more recent attempts of the New Formalists).³ But much of this acceptable “free verse” is still highly formalized (in the “cooked” kind of way, but without the rewards the most sublimated classic poetry affords by way of compensation!). Developments in the last decade have done little or nothing, as far as I can see, to inject a freshness back into what’s deemed “proper” poetry.

Ginsberg, for instance, may still be valued as a historical figure, but young poets who are interested in “howling”—as at least *one* of many strategies they

1. By the way, it was always hard for me to read Lowell in this quote, and in *Life Studies*, as not trying to co-opt the “raw,” which had supplanted him in popularity. On the other hand, he also used his clout, as a poet previously championed by the New Critics, to loosen some of its formal—and ethical—restraints, and its near monopoly on what was called proper high poetry in the 40s–50s. Of course, many other forces were at work at the time—from many of the “Donald Allen” poets to even the early criticism of Harold Bloom (his books on Shelley and Blake in particular, which passionately defended many of their poems that had been largely ignored—or derided—by the New Critics in favor of a few early pieces and the more formally restrained Keats).

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might wish to engage in as poets—are ushered to the back of the respectable bus. Well, some may claim the “poetry slam” in the last 15 or so years has largely taken up the slack for such poets—but the “slam establishment” also differs from the energy and eclecticism of the 50s and 60s in that poets aren’t encouraged to do much more than “howl.” In this, it often mirrors the exclusions of the proponents of the “higher,” page-oriented free-verse. There are promising young exceptions to this who cannot be pinned down by the current institutional divisions and who may, if permitted, inject some of the eclecticism back into the field of contemporary poetry that I found in Frank O’Hara, whose work—in its range from formal sonnets worthy of formalist Annie Finch’s critical ear to the more associative “raw” of which Lowell speaks—came closer to embodying the “grace to live as variously as possible” in its openness to various kinds of writing as ways of reaching different aspects of humanity—rather than settle for “mastery” of one exclusive specialized proper mode of poetry, which is the more touted “virtue” today.

JH: Thanks for this expanded look at the historical context of “raw” vs. “cooked.” For me, however, any overview of poetry, or literary theory for that matter, winds back inevitably to the question of craft, and to particular poems by particular poets. In light of the purpose of our exchange, following are two poems, both written in the last two years, that exemplify my “applied judgment” and hopefully will help us find more specific areas of discussion.

Cosmos

In years his tarpaper touch
 makes home a quick shack. He
 shocks sex & smoothes it over. His
 love washes out her very child.

2. Such a backdrop may help explain the seductive power of this quote (and the essay from which it is excerpted) for me in my early 20s: “Too many poets act like a middle-aged mother trying to get her kids to eat too much *cooked* meat, and potatoes with drippings (tears). I don’t give a damn whether they eat or not. Forced feeding leads to excessive thinness (effete).” —Frank O’Hara (9/3/59). Luckily, they didn’t take him out of the anthologies. But just because Frank O’Hara worked for me—lead me to Ashbery—which lead me to Shelley and eventually (though not until after I had received an M.A.)—to Shakespeare—doesn’t mean he’d work for my students. It’s important for me as a teacher to be aware of this. Many come to poetry with less suspicion of the “high tradition” than I did (and, besides, this narrative account is very bare-bones; it wasn’t as linear as that, and if I were to continue my narrative, the next stage would be, “after Shakespeare, I found myself going back to the poetry I had thought I outgrew, and, lo, I found that much of it was able to surprise me again, to speak to me in ways it couldn’t when I was 20.

3. I don’t think it’s their traditional metrics and complex subtle rhymes that have caused them to not reach more people; it’s that they come nowhere near as good as Yeats at his “old formalist” best.

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So she makes him this meal, it is
sliced stone, it is in jellied cold,
it is fish whites in broth the while she
stirs something else sickening

which is prayer:

starts out high again,
bright heavenly bodies, burn
over my shame in your great wisps
like the whorls at human fingertips.

Martha Zwiég, from *What Kind*

The first striking thing about this poem is its use of rhyme—internal, assonance and consonance—and alliteration; the second, its line breaks and phrasing. The lack of punctuation and enjambment combine to “re-fresh” each line, force a close reading of it. The change from third person point of view (“her”) to first the (“my”) in the penultimate line, gives the poem a sense of revelation—that the speaker is, at the close of the poem, in intimate contact with the reader. This is reinforced with the sense of the overall poem, how it moves from an “objective” (third-person) description of a certain kind of oppressed existence/marriage (rural, emotionally cold) to the interior of the speaker with the words “prayer” and “shame” but especially in the astonishing last lines which invoke the connection between the cosmos and the uniqueness of an individual’s existence by the image of “whorls at human fingertips.”

The construction of the lines is oddly enjambed, forces an emphasis on “he” and “his” for example, in the first stanza and throughout keeps you off-balance enough so that you need to pay attention to what the line actually says, *e.g.*

it is fish whites in broth the while she
stirs something else sickening

The use of “the while” instead of simply “while” seems perversely awkward until you realize how it both reflects the colloquial voice and slows the line just before the pivotal, important dropped line: “which is prayer.” As well, the “stirs something else sickening” has resonance with both “thickening” (as one does by stirring) and the act of stirring something up, something *else* (other than the ingredients at hand), thereby setting up the pivotal line and last stanza’s emotional revelation. Note also the emphasis on “she” as it moves into that person’s view. There’s much more to say about this poem, about its craft, line by line and overall, and beyond craft, its provoking of emotion and idea and meaning, and the way it satisfies what it provokes, but this is enough to

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give you an idea of how I read poems. The important point here, is that I read toward something larger than what each line delivers, toward a synergy of meaning where all the parts “add up.” In this case, the parts do add up, go toward a central nexus of emotion/intellect having to do with identity, intimacy, self-consciousness, choices in life, alienation, and so on.

The next poem, my contemporary counter example if you will, is quite impervious to the way I read poems. I’m not saying it’s better or worse than some other contemporary poems, just that it’s short and exemplary of a certain type of poem I find impenetrable, seemingly constructed without much thought or organizing principle and, therefore, (to me) unenjoyable:

Opus Focus

As misty expectations clear out bell-like, there comes

as assemblage of disorderly ideas
about what defies treatment
of the city’s phonic and acoustic
instincts, susceptible to demonstration
of incontestable crap and subject
to views that vary from street to haggard street

Double-up on obstinate inertia,
ordinary damages,
accumulated dangers.

What is absorbed while the remarkable occurs
in the mind of someone not wholly there?

G.E. Murray, from “New American Writing”, Number 20

While the imagery is interesting and whole lines are striking (the first, especially), as I read through line by line, re-adjusting what I understand as I go, trying to incorporate whatever has unfolded into the next line, I find myself stymied. These seem to be lines of a poem drawn randomly from a whole poem somewhere else, lines toward a poem, or maybe a map of a poem, a kind of “sketch”—but itself, not a satisfying or even, in my view, a complete poem, and nothing therefore compels me to read it more than twice. The playfulness of the title, the lack of connection between and among lines, the self-conscious question at the end all point toward what I call the who-cares poem, the poem that is trying to prove that same old point about the slipperiness of language and how clever the poet is for bringing it to my attention.

Of course, I think my way of reading a poem is fine, and that the second poem is truly lacking, but I’m open to the idea that there is another way of

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reading a poem that would enable me to feel differently about the second one. I look forward to your examples and to any responses you might have to mine.

CS: I want to share some of the thoughts and feelings I get when reading Zweig's "Cosmos." First, I definitely feel that description of an "oppressed existence/marriage" in the first two stanzas (and the emotional coldness of both the man and the woman, though I don't necessarily see it as "rural." I'm curious how you get that from the poem. The word "shack" seems to be the only blatant thing that might indicate that, but shacks aren't exclusively rural, and "the quick shack" is not even necessarily presented as literal, but rather the way the "home" is rendered by "his tarpaper touch"—that's how I read it in any event), and the tight, cramped verbal style of the poem helps evoke the emotional coldness of its content.

The first stanza begins with a strictly negative portrait of this man. He's too rough, not domestic enough, bad in bed, won't talk about it, avoids intimacy. He's to blame for her loss of innocence (am I missing something?). The second stanza is more strange and complex. First, there seems to be a possible double-entendre in "she makes him this meal," which could mean either she's cooking for him, or that she's eating him. Either way, there's a sense that she's out for some kind of revenge (the "so" becomes rather sinister). The images here become progressively more *alive*, though not necessarily in a pleasing way, "fish whites in broth" is perhaps the woman's attempt to force the man to notice the things the man smooths over in the first stanza. There's no middle option—either extremely cold or extremely sickening

When I reach that "pivotal" line, which poses some kind of connection between the "broth" and the "prayer," the poem begins to lose me a little. First the grammar seems purposely awkward—as we move from "sickening" to "prayer" to "starts out." There's enough there to piece together a meaning that the last stanza (or at least the final three lines) is supposed to be the prayer that the woman speaks "the while she/ stirs" (I'm assuming the first person here is supposed to be the voice of the "she"), and that she's invoking the "bright heavenly bodies" (though "burn" may not necessarily be a command—but if it's not, it's not clear what the subject of that verb would be), but if it is an invocation, what is she invoking the "bright heavenly bodies" to do? What does "burn over my shame" mean? It doesn't seem to mean "*eradicate my shame?*" for if Zweig meant that, she probably would have used something like "*burn through my shame.*" "*Burn over,*" to me, makes it sound like she wants to keep the shame in tact. (perhaps the shame is the burner over which is placed the pot of broth and prayer?) In any event, she seems to be asking the heavenly bodies to *illuminate* rather than *eradicate* the shame.

When I reach the end, I am left with many unanswered questions at this point, that, yes, could "force a close reading" of the poem: what is the woman, on a literal level, praying for? How does it relate to the meal she makes (for,

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or of) the man? How does the acknowledgement and illumination of shame connect to the situation presented in the first two stanzas? I find myself conjecturing, trying to discover, rather than merely invent, some thread of continuity, trying to solve the “riddle.” Surely, “human finger tips” is meant to contrast positively with “his tarpaper touch” at the beginning of the poem, but none of the other figures seem to be sustained or have a chance to become a “metaphysical conceit.” I also am fascinated by the linking of the macrocosm to the microcosm in those penultimate lines, but I feel there must be something else going on that I am missing. Is the prayer simply an attempt to re-inject the romantic intimacy the couple once shared? Is *he* her shame? I’m lost here... I don’t quite see the parts adding up as they do in Stevens’ “Snow Man” or Dickinson’s “I Heard A Fly Buzz...” for instance. Could you help?

JH: I’ll respond to your comments on “Cosmos” first.

Regarding my understanding of the poem’s setting as “rural”—I see the words “tarpaper”, “shack” and the colloquial “her very child” and “the while” as creating a rural setting. I agree that the “tarpaper touch” and “quick shack” are doing double-duty as non-literal images designed to speak metaphorically of an emotional atmosphere. I think they work on both levels.

Regarding “He’s to blame for her loss of innocence”, I’d also say yes, though I’m not sure it’s only an anti-him poem (and I didn’t choose it for that, but in spite of it), it may also be an anti-way-of-life poem (i.e. repressed, cold, isolated, backward, etc.)

Regarding your observation that “The second stanza is more strange and complex”—I agree. Yes, the use of “so” indicates an action against, something ominous. I like your reading of it and agree for the most part, though I think punctuation could have helped the poet here; a colon after “meal” for example, then a comma after “broth.” As for the idea of her making a meal of him, that double-meaning... I can see how that would fit in the “vengeful” scenario, but it doesn’t work grammatically because of “this.” If it were simply “So she makes him a meal,” period, the double meaning would be there, but it begins a list with the use of “this” making it clear that the meal is elsewhere, is to be explained. The ingredients of the meal are certainly unappetizing, if not inedible (“sliced stone”) and suggest a witch’s brew, or at minimum what you suggest, the “dish best served cold.”

Regarding “what does ‘burn over my shame’ mean?”—I agree this is loaded with ambiguity. Since it is part of a prayer, seemingly addressed to a deity or at least something higher, I take it on the simplest level to mean “continue your existence as stars and planets up there, burning, as I go about my own life down here” or “watch over” or “shine over” (as the sun would), with the idea that there is something in empathy continuing on—ironically, the use of “burn over” recalls the way shame “burns” a person, makes them blush and feel hot, and there is a synergy between the “burning” of the narrator in

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shame and the “burning” of the planets as part of their physical reality. There seems to be an attempt to connect what’s human with what’s eternal and universal. This continues with the “whorls,” which of course are congruent with the patterns of the cosmos, but also evoke an individual’s fingerprints, the whorls that identify each person as unique. This seems to affirm the narrator’s sense of individuality (paradoxically, since we usually feel smaller in the face of the cosmos). I agree with you that it also connects us back to the first line, the “tarpaper touch,” and that “touch” now seems in utter contrast, since it demeans rather than affirms the uniqueness of the individual as evidenced in her “fingertips” and that correspondence with the eternal in the cosmos

So, I had a different, more positive, reading of that phrase and ending. It’s interesting that you mention Dickinson, there is something of her in this, in the compressed, riddle-like quality. Every word counts.

CS: Here are two poems, neither of which I’d hold up as exemplary in any absolute way, but both of which, for me at least, do things I consider central to great poetry—despite, or maybe even because of, what may be seen to be their aesthetic flaws. The first one, especially, excels in that “communicative value” of which we’ve been speaking. The second one, written by an ex-student, might benefit from editing; it seems to have a more limited communicative value, and wears a certain smart-ass sloppiness on its sleeves, but when I compare it to much of what gets published as poetry today, I find in it a struggle to reach out, to understand and change reality that, at the very least, may complement the more polished or accomplished lyrics such as the one by Martha Zweig.

What is He?

What is He?

—A man, of course.

Yes, but what does he do?

—He lives and is a man.

Oh quite! But he must work. He must have a job of some sort.

—Why?

Because obviously he’s not one of the leisured classes.

—I don’t know. He has lots of leisure. And he makes quite beautiful chairs.—

There you are then! He’s a cabinet maker.

—No no!

Anyhow a carpenter and joiner.

—Not at all.

But you said so.

—What did I say?

That he made chairs, and was a joiner and carpenter.

—I said he made chairs, but I did not say he was a carpenter.

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All right then, he's just an amateur.
 —Perhaps! Would you say a thrush was a professional flautist, or just an amateur?—
 I'd say it was just a bird.
 —And I say he is just a man.
 All right! You always did quibble.
 D.H. Lawrence

Hazing

There's a "they" again that treats you like a pledge, well into your 40s.
 What do we do with this feeling?
 Prove it false, prove us false, or clean the house?
 Suck it in and analyze a cancer, beg
 a question notice an overgrown fly or rose-bush
 exercise the loins embrace the random or free associate
 as forgetting, doing one's scales, or sleep, the great
 tradition of detoxifying night, deific, a choice of rains, science
 trying to determine the least poisonous (the verdict in transit)

But now it feels like duty and beauty and health to remember
 the obstacles as obstacles, *they don't really want to treat*
you like a pledge well into your 40s but they're forced to
 My skeptic judge likes to nitpick the "reality" of the situation.
 When questioned on the subject, he'll claim his scalpel
 can open the door for the sublime spoon, the wave never brewed,
 never forked over by others, and why? "For it is your responsibility
 to regain a sense of yourself and highest it, however fleeting,
 to let yourself *be happy on welfare*, on the streets,
 when your apartment has no heat, et cetera. Things
 could be worse, so feel privileged over no one
 but the frustration that would engulf you did you not dip your quill in
 despair's inkwell
 to write, nobly, heroically, your way out of it. A tightrope perhaps
 (a tightrope of perhaps) in hopes of a fortunate fall that knows when to fold
 them."

But what has been lost, what has been lost, who wants to dwell on it,
 dwell in it, back where we started, but more weary (some say wiser)...?
Whisk away the "they" stoically, sans anger sans bitterness, sans "sans"
 (love's labor is not love and therefore must be lost). Whisk it away
 without warmth or any feeling but that called reason, a star of shit
 plucked from the vase to protect the living from the signs of life, a thin
 scrim coagulate, or wrong turn that determines creation and forgets the
 selfish fun of giving.
 The city is still unsure whether you just fell into it or chose it from the
 heart,

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and it is right not to trust you. Oh maybe the restless define a full-life
 in a way the longevity buffs may pity (the better at which to scoff),
 but how far can we take this “self-creation” business? Fantasy
 need not be bounced out of the “potentially tedious” bar of reality
 (and even my teetotaler and farmer friends have felt this)—
 for surely “you are the center of reality” is better than the dress-rehearsal
 rag.

when you find yourself wondering about luring others to your lair, exchang-
 ing dreams, comparing notes, overemphasizing sex then trading viagra for
 cigarettes and needing space.

Everyone wants romance and security.

Everyone wants romance. Everyone needs security.

And other meaningless statements. What have you chosen?

Both and neither. Ho hum. I know I would be seduced

by a gorgeous woman with a naturally beautiful voice

still somewhat in tact despite her pack a day habit

singing “believe in me because I don’t believe in anything”

especially if she also covers “emancipate yourself from mental slavery”

but maybe I’m just a leg man, face man, and, besides, I have no little say.

Philosophers and journalists may cultivate the mind, and pride themselves
 on being less superficial than fashion models and strippers,

and cigarettes are not so bad when your office cubicle is a coalmine

but where is your cry for help? *There is a objectively verifiable “they”*

actively trying to steal the best years of our life and this could be mine,

could be one of my tears (note the double-entendre for the benefit

of those who preach the page, if not “ye mere listeners”).

Tears, tears. How beautiful to be ripped! “Look, ma, how I’ve triumphed,

how I’ve overcome my need to cry for help from others.”

but mommy’s dead, and *they* give you an excuse to feel like a pledge,

ever hopeful, though the victim-charm has worn thin

and their co-ed frat is looking more and more like mere afterlife

David Garonsky

JH: I’ve read your examples and agree that both excel in “communicative
 value.”

Since you haven’t said anything more specific about either one, I can’t
 respond more specifically, but I will ask if you think the communicative value
 in these works is something different than the communicative value we could
 find in prose. In other words, do you think these pieces would communicate
 as well in prose format? Are the line breaks the only thing holding them
 together as poems? Also, it’s interesting how different these examples are from
 the Murray poem I offered as my counter-example, a poem that seems to be
 determined not to communicate, but that would never be mistaken as prose.
 It wouldn’t be mistaken for prose for several reasons, but its very non-com-
 munication is paradoxically one of them. It exudes mystery, one of the neces-

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sary ingredients (for me) of a poem, but finally frustrates sense. It's totally out of balance. The communication factor is a continuum in poetry, and if a poem is what-you-see-is-what-you-get, then you might as well be reading prose. On the other extreme, if it's a locked box, you get some kind of artifact—beautiful, maybe, but without purpose. Your thoughts?

CS: I'll first respond to your comments on the Zweig poem. My biggest question about the last stanza is this: you consider the point (epiphany?) of the last line as affirming or confirming individuality and its ultimate connection (or communion) with the highest, most real, "cosmic" powers. The transcendence you get in your reading, and which I now see more clearly (having read your reading, and looking back at the poem in light of that), might indeed be *in the poem*; but isn't the author (or at least the narrator's commentary voice) calling this a "sickening" prayer? I suppose "sickening" could be positive in the sense of "things have to get worse before they get better," or the prayer is only sickening to the *already sick* male in the poem (thus two negatives could make a positive), but the poem doesn't give me enough information to feel I can make that leap, and I feel you only make that leap by ignoring the way the word "sickening" frames, qualifies, and maybe even nullifies the positive reading of this prayer. The poor (poverty, by the way, may be at least as much the culprit in this "anti-way-of life" poem as rurality is) woman who speaks it, as an attempt to redress the shame she feels in the relationship, may momentarily find respite, but there's no sense that this is allowing her to consciously confront the reality of the bad relationship, or to try to change it. That to me, and I believe to Zweig, is what is sickening. Since you also read the prayer as "sickening," how does that tally with your "positive" reading?

Having asked that, I wonder if it ultimately even matters whether Zweig's intention is as you say or as I say, or whether it's purposely ambiguous to allow both readings. If it's the latter, the poem could be termed successful insofar as it, like the Murray piece, "exudes mystery" in a way different from a notion of prose that allegedly emphasizes clear, unambiguous, meaning. However, as someone trained in the (20TH century) art of "close-reading" of poems who relentlessly seeks out various interpretations for a poetic utterance or text, I've found that such a methodology itself has dangers; there's the temptation to "read too much" into things—whether they're called poetry or prose. It's not too difficult to find, in books by, say, Vendler, Bloom or Perloff: 20–30-page essays that brilliantly unpack the conundrums of one very short poem that may not at first have seemed to merit such attention. They may persuade; some poems may be "deceptively simple," but often I find that "close reading" itself can give the text under examination too much benefit of the doubt. Sure, some poems may wilt under the pressure of "close-reading," and I think we've demonstrated that the Zweig poem does not, but I'm still not entirely convinced I'm getting anything from the poem itself, or rather

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from the fact that it serves as a medium for you and I to communicate (not that I mind that especially).

I could also see how the Murray poem could be an occasion for an interesting, lengthy close reading if we were interested in pursuing it (especially the conundrum in lines 3–6), or if I were assigned to do so by a teacher or student, but I’d rather move on and address your questions about prose. The way you present the continuum (in reference to the four poems), Murray errs on the side of “non-communication,” Lawrence and Garonsky err on the side of “prose” and Zweig comes closest to the “golden mean” that balances both perfectly. But if the Murray piece, as you say, is a poem, in part, because of its “non-communication,” and the Zweig poem is rife with ambiguities (that may or may not be intentional) that cause you and I to have very different readings of it, then perhaps the definition of “poetry” that would dismiss Lawrence’s poem as “prose” is itself an unbalanced definition.

I don’t mean to hold up Lawrence’s piece as the quintessence of poetry (Lawrence himself wouldn’t), but I do think it offers a corrective to the emphasis on ambiguity in many definitions of high poetry. I know you earlier said we need to look at the poem rather than any claims made for it, but since we both have made claims for Zweig’s poem, I see no harm in quoting from Lawrence’s introduction to *Pansies*, from which his poem was taken:

These poems are called *Pansies* because they are rather *Pensees* than anything else. Pascal or La Bruyere wrote their *Pensees* in prose, but it has seemed to me that a real thought, a single thought, not an argument, can only exist easily in verse, or in some poetic form.... So I should wish these *Pansies* to be taken as thoughts rather than anything else; casual thoughts that are true while they are true and irrelevant when the mood and circumstance change. I should like them to be fleeting as pansies, which wilt so soon, and are so fascinating with their varied faces, while they last... not a wreath of *immortelles*. I don’t want everlasting flowers. (423–24)... At least, they do not pretend to be half-baked lyrics or melodies in American measure.”(417)

From this perspective, Murray, Zweig, and Garonsky (not to mention much of Lawrence’s own earlier poetry) are all rather “half-baked” in the timidity and coyness of their thought. I don’t think I’d go so far to say that “thought... can *only* exist easily in verse,” but I value the clarity of thought in “What Is He?”—a clarity which may be understood by those who don’t generally read poetry who might feel excluded by our other three examples, a clarity that is not incompatible with mystery, that may be simply expressed, but difficult to keep in mind (this poem, if taken seriously, can force me to rethink my life—in a way none of the others we’re talking about do, though at times Garonsky comes close). Although direct statement of thought is often a taboo in most acceptable 20TH-century American poetry (“show, don’t tell,” “tell it slant” etc.), I am not willing to consign it to the status of

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“mere prose.” Could this poem be bunched up into a prose dialogue, in, say, *Women In Love*? I suppose it could, but wouldn’t that make it lose its singularity in the process?

But even that distinction between “poetry” and “prose” may have much to do with the ways we’re trained to read them. For instance, if I excerpted a short passage from Beckett’s novelistic trilogy, Djuna Barnes’ *Nightwood*, Charlotte Bronte’s *Villette*, or Peter Handke’s *Slow Homecoming*, surrounded it with white space on the page, and read it slowly, closely, with attention to the individual words, rather than reading it for how it works in terms of moving the plot along, I could be transported as easily as by reading a poem by Dickinson, Plath, or Moxley. Nonetheless, I value the way the white space and the shortness of the poem (even “Hazing”), allows me to focus my attention and to see the macrocosm in the microcosm (like seeing the cosmos in the whorls of human fingertips).

JH: I think your point about “sickening” is a good one; in fact, if I were the poet’s editor I would have called to her attention that this word had a powerful and also ambiguous meaning in the poem and perhaps she’d want to reconsider it, or even leave it out for the sake of the whole poem, or maybe she’d convince me it was the right word after all. I often see published poems that could stand some revision, usually minor, that otherwise work fine. (And some that could stand major revision. And some that should never have been published at all, but that’s another discussion.) But, just for the sake of argument, let’s say “sickening” is the best word here. I do see it as ambiguous but not impossible—it works in my interpretation as a verb (she stirs (up) something else, in addition to the items in the meal, a prayer, in order to sicken, to make sick, this man, casting it as a kind of incantation) or with the primary meaning of something that makes the narrator sick (that is, the act of prayer itself weakens, sickens the narrator, or stressing the vertigo one feels in the face of an overwhelming problem, or when looking at the stars and sensing one’s aloneness, the “sickening” feeling one has in moments of desperation), or with a disgust about the act of prayer itself as something that never works, is a fool’s refuge.

The remarkable thing about this poem, and, I think, any good poem, is its meaningfulness; it is full of meaning(s). Ambiguity certainly heightens its meaningfulness also, which is a good thing in a poem with integrity (like this one).

Now, to your second, more provocative question: “Having asked that, I wonder if it ultimately even matters whether Zweig’s intention is as you say or as I say, or whether it’s purposely ambiguous to allow both readings?”

First, I don’t know what Zweig’s intention is or was, nor do you. So no, it doesn’t matter if we know/don’t know her intention. (As I pointed out earlier, as an editor, or teacher, such knowledge is germane to helping her produce her best work, but as reader we are not engaged in that process. The poem is

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presented as finished.) Our interpretations are not based on trying to read her mind, just trying to read her poem. Issues of ambiguity like the one with “sickening” either get resolved, or the interpretation gets re-framed, or they remain unresolved and stay ambiguous. I see this as a continuum—and this is certainly why some poems continue to be argued about and discussed. They retain some ambiguities of meaning. If a poem can’t be “nailed down” and made to yield a one-to-one correspondence with meaning on every front, that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t be interpreting them at all! In the case of poetry, reading is necessarily close reading. It’s all about figurative language and compressed meaning (not to leave out the pleasures of rhyme, rhythm and so on.) It’s as if you’re saying that if one is not positive what a poem means in every single way then it’s the reading itself that’s the problem, that we shouldn’t be trying to understand what we’re reading. This doesn’t make sense to me. The fact that some folks want to spend umpteen hours analysing a poem doesn’t diminish the value of the act of analysis itself, or the poem. As for “reading into” a poem—well, that’s what reading a poem is all about, isn’t it? But there’s reading into, and there’s reading into. You don’t want to use the poem as a complete Rorschach, nor can you—because there’s something there, it’s not a blob or a blank page. When you get a student, for example, who wants to say that Zweig’s poem is about a chicken who visited the empire state building and fried an egg on the roof, and challenges you to oppose this notion, you turn to the text and try to help them learn how to read it, yes? (Or send them to the school psychologist.) Maybe what you’re presenting as an alternative to interpretation is reading the poem as prose. Certainly, the poems you present as exemplary have lots of interest and generate ideas, there’s imagination and “poetic” language, but, at least in the case of Lawrence, little or no ambiguity. Yes, I think it could be found as a piece of dialogue in one of his novels—an interesting piece, of course.

Regarding “I could also see how the Murray poem could be an occasion for an interesting lengthy close reading if we were interested in pursuing it (especially the conundrum in lines 3-6)” I totally disagree. I think it would be a terribly unrewarding experience and not in the least interesting. I think the poem lacks integrity, is a series of fragments. Nothing connects and therefore, nothing satisfies. Whatever pleasure or meaning is in this poem resides in maybe a line, a phrase—the rest is so far into the “eye of the beholder” as to be non-existent. I am very interested in hearing how you would go about doing a “lengthy close reading” on this poem—please! Even a few sentences!

Regarding “But if the Murray piece, as you say, is a poem, in part, because of its “non-communication,” and the Zweig poem is rife with ambiguities (that may or may not be intentional) that cause you and I to have very different readings of it, then perhaps the definition of “poetry” that would dismiss Lawrence’s poem as prose is itself an unbalanced definition.

Some corrections are in order here: first, I don’t agree that the Zweig poem

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is “rife” with ambiguities, as a close reading proved. In fact, the only ambiguity I know of is the one we just discussed, “sickening.” Second, intentionality is not even an issue (as I noted above). Also, our readings were not that different, were they? Third, I didn’t mean to “dismiss” Lawrence’s poem as prose, simply point out that it really was prose (in my opinion). That doesn’t diminish its value as a piece of writing. Prose is not, by definition, inferior to poetry. And, I didn’t here propose a “definition of poetry”, but I guess it’s a de facto definition. If you’re interested, you can read my essay on the subject in “On the Prosing of Poetry” in Boston Comment. Also, I don’t think the Murray piece deserves to be placed on the same value scale as the Zweig piece. The Zweig poem is far superior in quality. My remark about the Murray piece “exuding mystery” and therefore being a poem, in no way makes it a valuable one, in my eyes.

Regarding the excerpt from *Pansies*—I love the Lawrence quote and the idea behind this “poetic form,” the “single thought” and “casual idea.” I think there are other instances of “poetic forms” in literature, for example, Kafka’s “Parables & Paradoxes” strike me as poetic forms, and certainly whole works of fiction are poetic without question (Joyce, Beckett, all the authors you point out and more). Again, the designation of “mere prose” is an unfortunate one, because there is much prose that is not “mere.” And, I think you’re right that the “framing” of a piece, as the Lawrence dialogue, gives it more opportunity for a reader to appreciate it, think about it, than if it were buried in a novel somewhere. The presentation is so important. The packaging.

But I think a more interesting line of inquiry is the different reading styles we may have—I’d rather have more explanation from you about your style, how you apply it to the poems you’ve chosen, so I can learn why you are not a fan of my close reading style, and find out more about what I might be missing by continuing with this style.

Regarding “From this perspective, Murray, Zweig, and Garonsky (not to mention much of Lawrence’s own earlier poetry) are all rather “half-baked” in the timidity and coyness of their thought.” (That is, the perspective of Lawrence’s writing on “Pansies”).

I don’t see any “timidity” or “coyness” in Zweig—not at all. I don’t know how to characterize Murray’s poem, but I don’t think those adjectives apply to it either. I’m curious as to why you would make this statement. Do you see really see “timidity” or “coyness” in Garonsky’s work, for example?

I like, by the way, your phrase “a clarity that is not incompatible with mystery” and agree with it. Clarity is not incompatible with mystery.

CS: I never meant to imply that “if a poem can’t be ‘nailed down’ and made to yield a one-to-one correspondence with meaning on every front” that therefore we shouldn’t be interpreting it or “trying to understand what we’re reading.” Nor did I mean to imply that I’m “not a fan of” close reading. I acknowledge that such readings may help persuade a reader to focus more

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closely on the uses of language (whether figurative, ambiguous, metaphorical, or even seemingly straightforward) in a poem or writing presented as prose, to show how it works, how it means, and, at its best, how it opens up our sensibilities to ideas or feelings that we might not have seen in the poem itself without the supplementary close-reading. For instance, in our readings and analyses of the Zweig poem, I don't think I would have "gotten" the "affirm individuality" reading, though I got the "macrocosm in the microcosm" one, and I don't think you would have paid as much attention to the possibility that "sickening" might qualify that).

Such close readings may even persuade a reader of the value of a poem, if one needed to be persuaded of that. Others may put forth poems precisely to show why they are not worth the attention. But perhaps they work best when I find I've already been *hooked* by the poem, but am curious to learn more about what others have to say about it. Often these critics, scholars, or readers may have very different readings of the poem—but that doesn't mean I don't find them valuable. My points were that: (1) not every close reading can persuade me of a poem's worth and (2), more importantly, just because not every poem is full of the kind of ambiguity that benefits from such a style of close reading doesn't mean it's always a lesser poem. For me, in the case of poetry, reading is not *always* close reading—especially if we're interested in communicative value. Not every poem, or reading of a poem, need be affirmed as "profound" by a process of analysis. The point of a poem is not always to speak to the analytical faculties. Sometimes the poem judges the judge; *sometimes* (not always) we murder to dissect.

To apply your criteria to the Lawrence poem:

1. *Does it exclude the reader?* I don't feel excluded by it.
2. *Is he mumbling?* He seems clear to me.
3. *Is he too clear—and banal—not worth the effort?* I'd say "no" here, because the poem doesn't require that much effort to read. I don't have to "brace myself" for the tense ambiguities the way I often expect to do when reading a Dickinson poem (or the Murray poem, which may not ultimately "deliver").
4. *Meter and rhyme?* I'm willing to concede low marks here.
5. *Imagery?* Slightly higher (the flautist image can be powerful).
6. *"The construction of a self that the reader can identify with"?* High marks here.

Part of what attracts me to "What is He?" is packaging, to be sure. But one of the reasons it wouldn't be as effective in a novel is because the dialogue in the poem is not spoken by characters who are developed anywhere outside this dialogue. Thus, we can't rely on the crutch of saying, "well, the first voice of this poem is one of the leisured classes, and goes on to kill his wife," or oth-

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erwise be tempted to subordinate this utterance to other aspects of the prose work. Rather, this dialogue, without specific external context, calls attention to itself, and even allows us to see it as a “quibble.” The didactic point may be too easily seen for some tastes, but beyond that, “What is He?” also dramatically embodies how people sometimes jump to conclusions. There’s an “affirmation of individuality” in one of the two speakers in this piece that, if taken seriously by the other speaker (or a reader) could be considered “sickening” (or at the very least—terrifying)—for if a bird is not a professional flautist, then a maker of beautiful chairs need not be a “professional” or an “amateur,” and this “quibble” can open me up to an identification (or oneness) with nature (if not necessarily “the cosmos”) by providing a different lens by which to perceive (and standard by which to judge) the behavior of people than those promulgated by “official reality.” There’s a masterful condensation here (every word counts) as he debates a huge problem with more “economy” than a prose paraphrase, and it seems a believable—though idealized—scene/encounter.

As for “Opus Focus,” well, I think it’s a foil for both of us. Nothing compels me to read it more than twice either—but since you asked, there seems to be one discursive thread that could be loosely paraphrased thus: “when we rid ourselves of expectations (or at least misty ones, there’s perhaps an implication that there are non-misty ones), “an assemblage of disorderly ideas” may, among other things, “double-up” on “obstinate inertia.” The “remarkable” may occur more when the inertia of expectations is supplanted by the disorderly and relative; there’s something here, but the last two lines seem tacked on; the leap too big.

Although I’m not satisfied by the way Murray’s lines “seem to be lines of a poem drawn randomly from a whole poem somewhere else,” I prefer the way Garonsky’s poem seems to utilize a similar strategy. The first line, italicized (and repeated with variations as a refrain throughout the piece), to me also reads like a line from “a whole poem somewhere else.” Yet the non-italicized lines connect more explicitly (if not too explicitly, or even as explicitly as the Lawrence piece) by presenting themselves as a commentary *on* the first line—not in a dry, “academic” way, but with a tone of urgency that questions the authenticity of the italicized *feeling*. At the start, the italicized voice is more judged than judging—but the judgment increasingly becomes a two-way street, for that line may ultimately be even more authentic than the more protracted “convincing” voice of the non-italicized (but later—in quotes) “skeptic-judge.”

On one level I see this poem as dramatizing a dialogue of “realism” and the incipient-imagination of passionate “skepticism.” There’s either a need to get beyond the bleak “truth” of the italicized first line, or a desire to get beyond an expression of feeling that may seem banal, cliché, and thus not even truth. The third line seems purposely ambiguous (or is it coy?): Do we

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have to prove us false to prove it false? Are the three questions in that line meant to be apposite, analogous? Or is “cleaning the house” to be taken literally as a distracting chore to (thankfully) keep one’s mind off the nagging question of what to do in the face of a personal or social crisis? For the remainder of this stanza, we are not provided with an answer, “(the verdict in transit),” or provided with so many that none are allowed to sink in. If the poem ended here, I would be tempted to call it a “who cares” poem (though it also, given the current poetic climate, might be deemed more publishable).

The second stanza starts by seeming to promise an answer that authenticates the italicized feeling with which the poem began, but after three lines we’re back to the counter-view of the “skeptical judge.” The speaker (paradoxically) becomes more skeptical about the authenticity of the skeptic, and thus the realistic view once again seems supplanted, not necessarily by a skeptic this time—but rather by an attempt at transcendence, which may be momentarily successful. But between the 2ND and 3RD stanzas, the “realistic” voice seems to have had time to regroup, to reassert itself against the skeptic-turned-visionary. It’s hard to tell, but it seems this “visionary” voice reappears in the italicized voice, to say: “If you get rid of the ‘They’ and take full responsibility for your actions and character, that solves the problem of the first line.” But here the skeptic or visionary voice is presented in such a reductive way (as opposed to the way it was presented in the previous stanza), the poem’s sympathy tilts toward the “realistic” voice—the skeptic-judge is itself judged—as too cold and ungenerous, however “visionary.”

At this point, the discursive flow loses me a little, forces me to slow down. For instance, I don’t see the transition between “selfish fun of giving” and “the city is still unsure...” (that seems like an Ashberian device I’ve seen enough times to distrust). Likewise, the beginning of the next sentence “Oh maybe the restless” seems a big jump. At this point (as with the Murray poem), I find it not worth the effort to figure how these lines “add up,” but maybe I’m just tired, and the purpose of these lines will hit me tomorrow. I’m willing to let them go for now, especially because when I see the phrase “‘self-creation’ business,” I’m brought back to what I’ve been seeing as the main discursive thread of this poem. In fact, the next line even announces a contrast between “fantasy” and “reality” in terms similar to the ones I’ve been using in this reading.

In the final stanza, the problem is stated in different terms (romance and security, wants and needs) or is it a different problem? Ambivalence (“both and neither”), like negative capability (everything and nothing), seems to be rejected by the speaker in favor of “realism.” Yet the poem’s two voices come together here, in the attempt to communicate to a reader by asking “where is your cry for help?” and in so doing crying for help itself. This may be pathetic, and the knowledge that it might be seen as pathetic, and that the “pathetic” is often a source of derision (“the better at which to scoff”), may have prevented the poem from simply coming out and crying for help right away. But

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I feel that this poem, in its meandering, digressive, and discursive dialectic (albeit with lyric moments), does not waste my time, but earned its right to cry by breaking down the 4TH wall to address me directly, and “show its work,” the poem (or prose if you must) behind the poem.

It's more difficult for me to apply your criteria to this poem, but I'll try:

1. *Does Garonsky exclude the reader?* I think in its use of philosophical abstractions, it definitely appeals to a more specialized sense of a reader than the Lawrence piece. Conversely, one could say the Lawrence poem excludes those who pride themselves on being “readers of poetry” more than Garonsky or Zweig.

2. *Is he mumbling?* Compared to Lawrence, yes. Compared to Murray, no. At times the thought/feeling is too fast, the associative leaps violate common rules of prose meaning (“a star of shit/plucked...signs of life.”). Yet at other times, the poem seems like it could benefit from being more condensed (like Lawrence or Zweig). Could it use editing? Yes, but is condensation always the point in poetry? I like the way it puts condensed lyric peaks (“cigarettes are not so bad when your office cubicle is a coalmine”) in dialogue with valleys of “prose” expressiveness (in ways that recall, say, Ashbery's “Soonest Mended,” Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, or Wordsworth's *Prelude*—maybe not as successfully, but its expansiveness weaves a trance that warms me with the feeling of being spoken to).

3. *Is it too clear—and banal—not worth the effort?* Less than the Lawrence poem. It certainly requires more analytical effort than “What Is He?” In contrast to Murray's fragment-lyric, it seems less “controlled” and “exposes its mechanics,” its thought-feeling processes, in ways that could offend lyric purists—but this also grounds the poem in a more human reality and helps me reacquaint myself with some of the reasons I began to read, and write, poetry in the first place—reasons that sometimes get lost in the emphasis on aesthetics.

4. *Meter and rhyme?* I'm willing to concede low marks here, unless “music is feeling, then, not sound” (as Stevens writes).

5. *Imagery?* A mixed bag. As often in Ashbery, it's not the primary focus, but there is some striking figurative language

6. *“The construction of a self that the reader can identify with?”* I'd give it high marks here, yet the constructed self here is, as in the Zweig poem, not necessarily one I would *want* to see my reflection in, whereas the constructed self seems more idealized in Lawrence (for better and worse).

Even though I originally thought of “Hazing” and “What Is He?” as representing two extremes I value in poetry, I now see many ways in which they are similar. The biggest weakness of both is “meter and rhyme” and thus both are susceptible to accusations of being “prose” or “free verse” in a way Murray or Zweig aren't. On a content level, neither, alas, explore love or an intimate

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interpersonal relationship but rather address questions about reality and identity—although in Garonsky the debate is presented as more blatantly “interior” and is left more ambiguous than Lawrence’s. One thing that might disturb about both these poems is that, in different ways, they usurp the role of the critic (if not the reader) by speaking directly to a reader, although Garonsky wrestles with ambiguity more (and thus can yield a longer “close-reading” than Lawrence’s more “transparent” language can). Yet, as a writer myself, I find Lawrence’s poem to present a more difficult challenge than the other poems at this juncture—precisely because it cares less about rules of verse than either Garonsky, Murray, or Zweig.

JH: I’m glad to hear that you find close reading valuable, only with qualifications. I, too, find it works best when “I’ve already been hooked by the poem.” In fact, I can hardly avoid reading a poem more closely once it has taken hold of me on an emotional or intuitive level, or piqued my curiosity with some mystery. A poem that moves me in some way also inspires me intellectually, provides a compelling reason to understand it more deeply or completely in order to increase my pleasure in reading it. I’ve never really understood the “murder to dissect” objection to analyzing creative work of any kind unless a dissection is crude, reductive, off the mark, wrong-headed or an obvious and fatuous exercise in scholarship or the occasion for personal projections, axe-grindings, and so on. A sympathetic, reasonably intelligent, reasonably educated reader of poetry who is moved by a poem is naturally attracted, I think, to re-reading it, to thinking about it more deeply, in short, to a close reading of it. Don’t we want to get closer to that which attracts us, to observe, try to understand more about it?

The other kind of close reading I do (and I’m sure you do) is work-related and necessary for giving useful feedback as teacher and editor. Maybe here there is some danger of murdering to dissect, too much emphasis on the way a poem works (or doesn’t), and the resulting discouragement may “murder” the poem and its maker.

In either case, your statement: “For me, in the case of poetry, reading is not always close reading—especially if we’re interested in communicative value” is not the case for me. For me, in the case of poetry, reading is *always* close reading—especially if we’re interested in communicative value. In fact, I think that every utterance, not just poetry, demands close reading—or listening—if we are interested in its communicative value. The amount of ambiguity in everyday speech and writing—even non-verbal communication—is staggering and has little to nothing to do with how profound its actual content. Most ambiguity comes from lack of clarity, not profundity.

On another point, I agree that the point of a poem is “not always to speak to the analytical faculties”—in fact, if a poem sets out to do that, it’s pretty doomed to be dull. I think the poem’s goal is to speak around, beside, under,

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near the analytical faculties, not to them. A poem should reach us on another level—intuitive, emotional—through imagery, metaphor, sound, rhythm and then the analytical faculties become engaged. Our analytical faculties fail to become engaged when the poem is not successful on that first level of interest, when it is impervious (c.f. Murray) or simply tepid.

Your poem examples are both interesting in different ways. The presentation of a piece of dialogue, its isolation from a supposed larger context (play or novel or story) and its identification as a poem by Lawrence is an interesting, innovative act. While I've seen lots of prose and fragmented utterances labeled as poems, I've never seen self-contained dialogue, as from a play, identified as a poem. So, while I'm not in agreement with the label (and that's another long discussion, best postponed), I am intrigued. I also find its content worthwhile, profound even, as it deals with the essence of being human, what it means to simply be something not be defined by action. However, it is certainly an instance of dialogue and has none of the characteristics I associate with a poem—imagery, metaphor, sound, rhythm and so on.

The second example, by Garonsky, I clearly identify as a poem and I enjoy the sweep of it, the energy of the voice, accumulation of argument through imagery and repetition and the complexity of the stance. A number of problems prevent me from totally engaging with it, including some grammatical confusions (subject reference), questionable word choices and placements and passages that seem gratuitous where the poet seems carried away in his utterance and not guiding it purposefully.

In any case, I enjoy both, and paradoxically at a more intellectual level than Zweig's poem because both of your examples make a direct appeal to the intellect, to engage with their ideas by presenting "arguments" of one kind or another, and both are persuasive (though Lawrence more than Goransky for reasons I've cited).

I've also enjoyed our dialogue. It's certainly opened more doors than it's closed. I suspect we could go on indefinitely—the sign of a good, and productive, conversation.

CS: I, too, have enjoyed our dialogue, even though (or perhaps because) I've found myself sacrificing some depth of analysis for the breadth of issues we've put forward. We've certainly raised more issues than we could adequately cover here, but I see it as a kind of "seed planting" and would certainly welcome any responses by readers of *Fulcrum* in the future. Among the points you made in your last post, I'm especially intrigued by the issue of intellect and emotion/intuition. I'm fascinated by the way I often find it difficult, if not impossible, to draw a clear line of demarcation between them, when attempting to analyze what moves me in a poem on the page (the stage adds even more wrinkles, which I won't address here). I think I understand why you see the Lawrence and Garonsky poems as appealing more to the intellect than the

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emotions, but in the case of Garonsky what attracted me to it was its *emotional* intellect; what moved me is precisely the way the argument gets lost in “the sweep of it, the energy of the voice,” I’d even go so far as to say the “grammatical confusions (subject reference)...where the poet seems carried away in his utterance.” This does not mean I don’t appreciate a clearer, more purposeful argumentative poem (such as the Lawrence dialogue, or the more “poetically correct” Yeats’ “Dialogue of Self and Soul.”)

It’s interesting that in our readings of Zweig we also pointed out moments of grammatical confusion that lend it an ambiguity that may or may not be purposeful. Not that Zweig gets “carried away” (the piece certainly seems more edited), but that she, like Garonsky, suggestively appeals to our synthetic faculties at least as much as our analytic ones (as we’re drawn to piece together a meaning in our hardly exhaustive “close readings”). One could say the ambiguity of these poems might *be* their communicative value (though not as “everyday speech” has it. Rather, they both can be seen as appealing on a “musical” level, insofar as “music” speaks on a less analytical, more emotional level), yet because I agree with you that most ambiguity in everyday speech “comes from a lack of clarity,” I wouldn’t make such a claim. Instead I see a tension in these pieces between ambiguity, or “music,” on one hand, and communicative value on the other.

I’d claim *all* of these poems present an argument. This might be because I tend to focus on the “argument,” no matter how implicit it may seem, when analyzing a poem to determine what it says, as much as how it works, or what it does. Yet I am aware that others read poetry very differently. Last week, I was astounded when some students told me that some poems can make them cry. I’m pretty sure that no poem (at least on the page) has ever made me cry. It may have made me *think* about crying—or maybe, when crying, I may recall a certain poem, and even drop tears on the page I’m groping to read—but, in contrast to lyrical songs, or some stage performances, poems on the page haven’t reached me that way. Perhaps this says more about my reading habits than anything, but it also humbles me to try to check my particular standards at the door when teaching a poetry workshop—not so much because I’m afraid of “murdering” the students, but because I know their very different ways of approaching poetry (as reader and writer) are not going to get away. At its best, I may even genuinely learn something from them that challenges any tendency I have to offer prescriptions on how to write for anyone other than myself.