

The Energy of Poetry in a Culture of Saturation

Mark S. Burrows

We live in a fast-paced world: fast food, fast travel, fast information, fast everything. Our capacity to surf the web opens us to vast and expanding horizons of information in ways that were unimaginable only a generation ago. Our accessibility via cell phones allows us to “be” everywhere at once given the ever more sophisticated wireless technologies that many now hold in their hands; smart phones and iPads, in all their technological permutations, are part of a revolution of human connectivity. Ours is a culture of saturation, one in which the question of limits seems to be constantly shrinking. GPS devices, linked as these are to such recent technological gadgets, tell us precisely *where* we are at any given moment. But *who* are we, and where are we headed? *Quo vadis?*

To speak of the value of poetry in times like ours might seem strange, if not irrelevant. What, after all, can poetry offer in such a fast-paced, technologically saturated world like ours? The question posed by the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin, writing in the first half of the 19th century, seems to anticipate our hesitation: “For what use are poets in destitute times?” And, more recently, W. H. Auden claimed in his poetic tribute to W. B. Yeats that “poetry makes nothing happen”—which is surely true, when judged by the pressures of an achievement-oriented world like ours. But this line is one marked by irony, as Auden’s poem goes on to suggest. The deeper question is what poetry *does* make happen—or, more to the point, *how* poetry works on us and in us. Such wonderings shape this essay which explores the energy of poetry in a prosaic age like ours.

In his Norton Lectures—published in 1986 as *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, but never delivered because of his sudden death—Italo Calvino

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pointed out that “we live in an unending rainfall of images,” but he went further in clarifying that these are images

stripped of the inner inevitability that ought to mark every image as form and as meaning, as a claim on the attention and as a source of possible meanings. Much of this cloud of images fades at once, like the dreams that leave no trace in the memory, but what does not fade is a feeling of alienation and discomfort.¹

To face and hope to survive this deluge, it seems that we have no choice but to join the hustle of connectional relevance. The notion of doing only *one* thing at a time, *any* one thing, seems increasingly quaint. But need this be so? A generation ago, Sven Birkerts lamented as much, suggesting that the promise of these technologies brought with it an erosion of what he called “duration experience,” the capacity to linger with one task and call upon the patience needed for sustained inquiry of any kind.² The older among us will remember a simpler life before all of this. We might even admire the Greek shepherd, described in a recent poem by Jack Gilbert, who “longs to live married to slowness.”

What are we to do in the face of this expanding, and even engulfing, “cloud,” which overshadows in ways that fail to eradicate the gnawing sense of aloneness, which Calvino describes as leading to alienation and discomfort? How do the pressures of such advances awaken a longing within us for something *else*, some connection to a more enduring reality that transcends our activities? Charles Taylor has devoted considerable attention to this question in his recent cultural critique, *A Secular Age*, pointing as he does to our insatiable yearning for what he calls a “sense of fullness” that we depend upon for our well-being, an awareness that “unsettles and breaks through our ordinary sense of being in the world, with its familiar objects, activities, and points of reference.”³ Taylor goes on to say that

[t]hese may be moments, as Peter Berger puts it, describing the work of Robert Musil, when ‘ordinary reality is “abolished” and something terrifyingly *other* shines through,’ a state of consciousness which Musil describes as ‘*der andere Zustand*’ (the other condition).⁴

An experience of this “other condition” is one that the poet Robert Frost once described as offering us “a clarification of life—not necessarily a great

1. Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 57.

2. See Sven Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* (New York: Faber and Faber, 1994).

3. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 5.

4. *Ibid.*, 5 – 6.

clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion.”⁵ We experience such moments as experiences of breakthrough, moments of presence, even if they offer only glimpses of the sense of fullness. For this very reason, however, they might also strike us with the force of an “epiphany,” a word whose Greek root – *epiphanein* – signals a “showing forth” or “shining through.”⁶

In an age like ours in which we suffer from “information overload” and the pressures of ever expanding accessibility, what are we to make of the sense of loneliness that seems to mark our culture? The very language of a “shining through” might strike us as quaint given the unending barrage of the “clouds of images” besieging us on every side. And yet precisely in such a time, the words of the German poet Hilde Domin ring true: “We eat bread, but we live from radiance [*von Glanz*],” an echo to the ancient text from Deuteronomy that Jesus turns against the devil in the wilderness (cf. Mt. 4. 1 – 4).⁷ It is this “radiance” (*Glanz*) that interests me precisely because of the way it points to poetry’s capacity to generate “epiphanies,” its power of “in-sight” that connects us with a reality coming to us from “beyond” ourselves—even while breaking in upon us and finding its shape within us.

Poems, at least the strong ones, strike a chord within us which lingers in our minds and produces some echo of the effect felt by the poet herself. This may seem a strange way of speaking, but it is one of the dimensions of poetry—in contrast, say, to painting or music, both of which are in their “reception” markedly different than they are in their creation—that makes of it a unique art form: viz., the reader “makes” the poem happen again, in and through her own articulation. As Paul Valéry put it, poetry “tends to reproduce itself in its own form, it stimulates our minds to reconstruct it as it is.”⁸ This is not to say that the poem means the same thing to the reader as it did to the writer, or for that matter to other readers. No, I mean to say something quite different than this: the poem is an art-form we experience as a dynamic event, one involving both sound and sense. Poems “happen” to us. They are *events* that *constitute* something within us. They call us not to comprehend something, but rather to participate in the reality they gesture toward.

5. Robert Frost, “The Figure a Poem Makes,” in Robert Frost, *Collected Poems, Prose, and Plays* (New York: The Library of America, 1995), 777.

6. On this theme and its relation to the arts, see George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 226 f.

7. Hilde Domin, “Die Heiligen,” in *Nur Eine Rose Als Stütze. Gedichte* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer Verlag, 1994), 30. My translation.

8. Paul Valéry, “Remarks on Poetry,” in *The Art of Poetry*, translated by Denise Folliot with an Introduction by T. S. Eliot (New York: Pantheon Books, 1958), 209.

As epiphanies, poems often do this in the ways they take us by surprise. Startlement is their familiar mode of entry. As the poet Jane Hirshfield suggests, they “transport us into previously unanticipatable comprehensions,” luring us beyond familiar assumptions, offering us glimpses as she puts it of “the as-yet-undiscovered [which] brings an enlargement of life.”⁹ She goes on to suggest that poems “preserve their inaugural newness in part because they are like the emotions—not object, but experience, event.”¹⁰ Their energy has to do with the ways they point to a capacity we have within us, recalling vivid lines of one of Frost’s poems, the sense of an “ever breaking newness / And [our] courage to be new.”¹¹ Strong poems remind us, as Italo Calvino put it, that “we are always searching for something hidden or merely potential or hypothetical, following its traces wherever they appear on the surface.”¹² In such ways, they function like Jesus’ parables, inviting us to live in what he calls the “kingdom” or “empire” of God [*basileia theou*], with its startling inversions of power and privilege for the sake of the common good. They offer us that “sense of fullness” (Taylor) that interrupts us the midst of life, startling us in the long stretches of our lives when it seems to us as if we are living in the shadows of the familiar. Carroll describes the prosaic world bereft of this poetic energy when poor Alice encounters “the Mock Turtle,” who tells her of his schooling. He’d taken “the regular course,” which meant “reeling and writhing, of course, to begin with, and then the different branches of Arithmetic – Ambition, Distraction, Uglification, and Derision,”¹³ precisely those dimensions of our experience that choke art and prevent us from receiving such epiphanies. This longing for a “sense of fullness” frames my approach to the peculiar “energy” of poems, their capacity to invite our conversion and lead us toward a greater wholeness of life.

Let us begin with this premise: art shares with religion a longing for wisdom, a kind of deep knowing rooted in the imagination. As with religion, art is constellated by our yearning for what *is not*—or, what is *not yet*—rather than our management of what *is*. Both have to do with the creativity of vision, the spontaneity of dream, rather than any certainty of reason, precision of argument, or clarity of technique. Religion, like fiction and poetry, offers us what Jeanette Winterson calls “a way into other realities”; they are “not a version of the facts [but] an entirely different way of seeing.”¹⁴ Strong poems,

9. Jane Hirshfield, *Hiddenness, Uncertainty, Surprise: Three Generative Energies of Poetry* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 2008), 49 – 50.

10. *Ibid.*, 46.

11. “The Courage to Be New,” in Frost, *Collected Poems, Prose, and Plays*, 351.

12. Calvino, *Six Memos*, 77.

13. Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures*, 113.

14. Jeanette Winterson, “Writer, Reader, Words,” in *Art Objects. Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 28.

like religious teachings, name our plight, as we hear in these familiar lines from Wordsworth:

The world is too much with us, late and soon.
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!

Here, the poet laments what we lose because of “ambition and distraction,” the first two lessons in the Mock Turtle’s “regular course.” They lure us into squandering our abilities, and forfeiting our hearts. Hollow greed, Wordsworth suggests, alienates us from beauty, and ultimately impoverishes us.

This will not be news to us; it no longer startles us, since it has come to define the culture we inhabit. But how might we find our way back to “nature”? Here, Wordsworth’s poem offers little help. The poet Denise Levertov takes the opening line, which is familiar to the point of sounding like a cliché, and improvises brilliantly on it in her poem “O Taste and See.” Beginning with this familiar line from Psalm 34—“O taste and see that the Lord is good”—she frames the problem facing us differently than had Wordsworth:

The world is
not with us enough.
O taste and see
the subway Bible poster said,
meaning The Lord, meaning
if anything all that lives
to the imagination’s tongue,
grief, mercy, language,
tangerine, weather, to
breathe them, bite
savor, chew, swallow, transform
into our flesh our
deaths, crossing the street, plum, quince,
living in the orchard and being
hungry, and plucking
the fruit.¹⁵

Here Levertov varies Wordsworth’s admonition, reversing directions in a way that startles what we expect to hear. Her approach redefines the meaning of this familiar biblical command, turning us not *away from* the world but *into its very heart*. Taking this command seriously, as she suggests, is not about fleeing the world in order to find refuge in something transcendent; her critique of escapist forms of spirituality is only barely veiled. Rather, the poem calls us to embrace

15. Denise Levertov, “O Taste and See,” in *Poems 1960 – 1967* (New York: New Directions, 1967), 126.

this world, to “taste and see” nothing less than the ordinary and varied texture of what life offers—“meaning / if anything all that lives / to the imagination’s tongue.” This echoes the poet Rilke’s conviction, expressed in a letter written late in his life:

Religion is something infinitely simple, simpleminded. It is not knowledge, not the content of our emotion (for all possible content has been granted already from the beginning wherever a human being engages with life). It is neither duty nor renunciation; it is not limitation, but in the perfect expanse of the universe it is *a direction of the heart*.¹⁶

Such a poem turns from the dour God of the Puritans, still stubbornly alive and well among us: the stern Father who chides us for our broken lives, shames us for our sin, condemns bodily delights—including, for many Protestants early and late, the extravagant allure of the arts. We often think of the arts as collections to “visit”—paintings gathered in museums, or, in a quite different sense, musical recordings on CDs or our iPods. They are “things” we can visit, experience, or in some cases own – an “exhibit” is a collection that “holds” various things together (*exhibere* from *ex+habere*, to “hold from”). But such images place no real demands upon us, and rarely presume to change us. We turn from those art forms which refuse to be worked into our “program,” texts not easily comprehensible, music exposing us to unfamiliar sounds, stories that provoke without resolution.

In contrast, we often give ourselves over to expressions of the arts—and, for that matter, religion—that make no demands on us, offering no particular “direction of the heart.”¹⁷ We choose manageable prose over what Rilke calls “that vast, humming, and swinging syntax to which everyone feels free to add by speaking what is closest to [their] heart.” We confine art, in the public arena as in our houses of worship, to what is decorative or satisfying. In church, we rely on music to fill the awkward silences in worship and, from the great dance that constituted the medieval liturgy, we have kept at most the choir’s modest and managed processional. And we presume, often unwittingly, that the norms of religion have more to do with restricting delight, with controlling our passions, than with plumbing their often unsettling depths.

Against such tendencies, Levertov reminds us that the *sanctuary* is nothing less than the *world* we inhabit, the life and death we face, and *religion*

16. Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Poet’s Guide to Life. The Wisdom of Rilke*, edited and translated by Ulrich Baer (New York: The Modern Library, 2005), 163.

17. Rilke, *The Poet’s Guide to Life*, 127.

what “lives to the imagination’s tongue.” What “direction of the heart” leads us into such epiphanies, offering us moments when some radiance “shines through” the veil of the *ordinary*, when we find that “sense of fullness” in the sanctuary of what is *at hand*? Where are the glimpses of a beauty which “shines through” long after we leave the museum or concert hall, or set the book aside? Levertov’s vision in this poem is expansive: religious imagination, she suggests, is not about “the Lord” in some narrowing manner, but has to do with “*all* that lives to the imagination’s tongue.” It awakens us to that “direction of the heart” we know as wonder. And this requires the essential work of attentiveness, of patiently and persistently opening ourselves to the presence of this world.

In a poem entitled “Mysteries, Yes,” Mary Oliver puts it this way:

Truly, we live with mysteries too marvelous
to be understood.

How grass can be nourishing in the
mouths of the lambs.
How rivers and stones are forever
in allegiance with gravity
while we ourselves dream of rising.
How two hands touch and the bonds will
never be broken.
How people come, from delight or the
scars of damage,
to the comfort of a poem.

Let me keep my distance, always, from those
who think they have the answers.

Let me keep company always with those who say
“Look!” and laugh in astonishment,
and bow their heads.¹⁸

This is a marvelous poem, suggesting how it is that we come to “the comfort of a poem,” to its essential “energy.” Here, she invites us, finally, to something as old-fashioned and essential to our well-being as *reverence*. “Look!” she cries out, echoing Jesus’ simple words: “Consider the lilies of the field. . .and the birds of the air,” his ridiculous and beautiful admonition: “Don’t be anxious about your life!” “Laugh in astonishment”; “bow [your] heads.”

We do well to notice that Oliver’s point moves *beyond* understanding the poem. What she gestures toward cannot be contained in language. She invites

18. Mary Oliver, “Mysteries, Yes,” in *Evidence. Poems* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009), 62.

us to live *differently*, to open ourselves to this life, to our world, with vulnerability to what we cannot *know*. She implies that understanding alone is not adequate to carry our longing toward the margins of mystery. The German philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein put it this way in a now famous aphorism: “There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. *They make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical.”¹⁹ Wallace Stevens, simplifying this thought even further, wonders: “Is there a poem that never reaches words?”²⁰ Poetry, fired by the dynamic pressures of metaphor, lives toward these boundaries; such a “direction of the heart” is what gives poems—and, indeed, religion—an essential energy, a “sense of fullness” that cannot finally be put into words.

Levertov’s poem moves toward an exhortation unlike Wordsworth’s, inviting us to deepen our vulnerability to our world and offers an odd list of things and experiences by which we might do this: *grief, mercy, language, tangerine, weather*, for a start. What she presumes is that each has a radiance of its own, if we only learn how “to breathe them, bite, savor, chew, swallow, transform into our flesh our deaths.” It is her way of seeing in them an “excess” which shines through, a radiance – varied expressions of the “sense of fullness” we long for. And, importantly, she suggests through layers of allusion that our “fall” has less to do with *sin* than it does with *neglect*: the holy “shines through” the goodness of all that is, a reversal of the biblical story of Adam and Eve. Our life is not shaped by the prohibition “Do not eat of this fruit”; rather, we are encouraged to “cross the street” and “pluck the fruit.” This act, far from violating some divinely authorized order, satisfies our hunger for *communion*. This is the desire Levertov sees as “original” within us, defining what it means for us to expect such epiphanies to happen to us – precisely in the ordinary dimensions of life.

One of the difficulties besetting so much of religious life as we know it, in churches that have for too long tolerated a diminished role for the arts, is the failure of our imagination. It has to do with our fear of the unmanageable passions and transgressive powers inherent in creativity, energies that take us toward the “other”—God, neighbor, stranger, and, yes, enemy. The lure of epiphany, the poem’s energy, calls us toward the boundaries where the familiar and unfamiliar meet, a movement that resists the third and fourth lessons in the Mock Turtle’s “regular course”: viz., “uglification” and “derision,” forces

19. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge, 1922), 6. 522.

20. Wallace Stevens, “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” in *Collected Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1997), 343.

regrettably so natural to us, tendencies which devalue our world and blunt us to the “startlement” of beauty.

Against such habits, the poet Adam Zagajewski suggests that poetry leans toward some “sense of fullness.” It anticipates the “shining through” characteristic of the arts. As he puts it,

Poetry searches for radiance.
It is the kingly road
that leads us farthest.

We seek radiance in a gray hour,
at noon or in the chimneys of the dawn,
even on a bus, in November,
while an old priest nods beside us.

The waiter in a Chinese restaurant bursts into tears
and no one can think why.
Who knows, this may also be a quest,
like that moment at the seashore,
when a predatory ship appeared on the horizon
and stopped short, held still for a long while.
And also moments of deep joy

and countless moments of anxiety.
Let me see, I ask.
Let me persist, I say.
A cold rain falls at night.
In the streets and avenues of my city
quiet darkness is hard at work.
Poetry searches for radiance.²¹

Poetry – and we with it – seek such “radiance,” he reminds us, “in a grey hour,” and in the oddest and most ordinary of places and times. What momentum does the energy of the poem hold within itself? Zagajewski reminds us that it is a “quest,” and one that grips us in “moments of deep joy and countless moments of anxiety.” The radiance that searches for us, that yearns to “shine through” the ordinary structures of our days and nights, answers our longing to “see” and “persist,” despite the “quiet darkness” that is always “hard at work” in our world, and often enough in our lives. In the midst of all this, poetry searches for radiance. In our search for meaning hidden from first glance, or buried beneath the pressures of suffering and sorrow, we nonetheless come to find – recalling Calvino’s image—that “the word connects the visible trace with the invisible thing, the absent thing, the thing that is desired or feared, like a

21. Adam Zagajewski, “Poetry Searches for Radiance,” in *Eternal Enemies*, translated by Clare Cavanaugh (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008), 29.

frail emergency bridge flung over an abyss.”²² The energy of the poem is one instance of this movement toward “connectivity.”

All of this is to say that the energy of the poem, like religious faith, is not a mechanical tool. It is not an automatic reflex. As a “clarification of life,” as Frost put it, art is and remains in an important sense useless. It does not declare or inform, but rather invites, entices, suggests. Paul Valéry clarifies this energy by contrasting prose to poetry by the analogy of walking and dancing:

Walking, like prose, always has a definite object. It is an act directed *toward* some object that we aim to reach Dancing is quite different. It is, of course, a system of acts, but acts whose end is in themselves. It goes nowhere. Or, if it pursued anything it is only an ideal object, a state, a delight, the phantom of a flower, or some transport out of oneself, an extreme of life, a summit, a supreme point of being. But however different it may be from utilitarian movement, this essential yet infinitely simple observation must be noted: *that it uses the same limbs, the same organs, bones, muscles, and nerves as walking does.* It is exactly the same with poetry, which uses the same words, the same forms, the same tones as prose.²³

Poetry lives by something like the movement of dance in that its life is its purpose. It “goes nowhere,” as Valéry suggests, or in the words of W. H. Auden, it “makes nothing happen”²⁴—except that it beckons us into the heart of the “living, breathing word” which is what happens when language begins its dance within us. And this has to do with the kind of imagination we know not as duty or discipline, understanding or admonition, but rather—and quite simply—as “a direction of the heart” toward a “sense of fullness.”

Such imagination is what lures us to see our world, to frame our lives and the lives of others, in more generous ways. The real question before us as adults is not whether what we believe is impossible, since the things worth giving our lives to often seem to be either impossible or at least improbable — like love for the enemy or generosity toward the stranger. No, the deep question is a different one: whether our beliefs finally matter for the sake of others, whether they are true for the life of the world. The “courage to be new” calls us to embrace “all that lives to the imagination’s tongue,” even when we recognize its apparent futility when measured against our “purpose-driven” habits. A poem by Langston Hughes (d. 1967), one of the shapers of the Harlem Renaissance, captures this insight eloquently. In “To You,” he writes:

22. Calvino, *Six Memos*, 77.

23. Paul Valéry, *The Art of Poetry*, 206 – 7.

24. W. H. Auden, “In Memory of W. B. Yeats,” in *The Collected Poetry of W. H. Auden* (New York: Random House, 1945), 50. The ironic force of this line should not be missed; Auden goes on to say, about poetry, that

. . . it survives
In the valley of its saying
where executives
Would never want to
tamper; it flows south
From ranches of isolation
and the busy griefs,
Raw towns that we believe
and die in; it survives,
A way of happening, a
mouth.

To sit and dream, to sit and read,
To sit and learn about the world
Outside our world of here and now –
 Our problem world –
To dream of vast horizons of the soul
Through dreams made whole,
Unfettered, free – help me!
All you who are dreamers too,
 Help me to make
 Our world anew.
I reach out my dreams to you.²⁵

Art can have this effect on us. In its spell, we often find ourselves awakening, in ways that either disturb or delight us, to that “world outside our world of here and now”—in a word, the “shining through” of epiphany. Poetry shaped by such an aesthetic invites us to imagine something “else,” and dare to *dream* it—and then “reach out [these] dreams” to “all you who are dreamers too.” This is the energy such a poem carries within itself: it enables us to imagine something that is not (yet) present, to announce the way the world *might* be. Again, Langston Hughes:

Hold fast to dreams,
for if dreams die,
life is a broken winged bird
that cannot fly.²⁶

Such dreams invite us into a larger “sense of fullness,” and one we share with others in the social world we inhabit. They invite our conversion of mind, startling us by offering different ways of seeing across the distances. In point of fact, the “gap” at the heart of metaphor, the tension between unlike things and the *Spannungsfeld*—or “horizon of tension”—that metaphor creates across this distance, is inherent in the very structure and function of poetry, shaped as it is by metaphor. They give poems their energy, and are essential in cultivating a vigorous imagination. In this sense, churches are metaphorical communities. They live in the prophetic dreams and images that promise to “make our world anew,” as Hughes put it. But this requires courage, the “courage to be new” as Frost suggests, the audacity required to “sit and dream, to sit and read,/ To sit and learn about the world/ *Outside our world of here and now,/ Our problem world.*”

Dreams of this magnitude call us to reach beyond what we know, to draw a wider and more inclusive circumference of dignity for those at the edges

25. Langston Hughes, “To You,” in *Collected Poems* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 546.

26. Hughes, *Collected Poems*, 32.

of our society. Many in our world, and even in our churches, would gladly settle for smaller dreams and less noble metaphors than these. But such dreams cannot be silenced. When we try, as Jesus reminded us, the very stones themselves will cry out. Perhaps our worship ought to begin with Hughes' bold words: "All you who are dreamers too, / Help [us] to make / Our world anew." Prophets like Hughes—and Jesus, for that matter—are the dreamers we need in a culture of saturation like ours, for they remind us that poetry is not a solution to such challenges but "a different way of seeing" (Winterson). They lure us to imagine singing "new songs," calling us "to sit and learn about the world"—and dare to imagine making it "anew." Such audacity will not change the "fast" world we inhabit. But the energy of poetry like this might encourage us to indwell that world with a sense of attentiveness. And, if so, it will remind us that we live "not by bread alone, but by radiance."

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