Three Approaches to Poetry

VIRGINIE GREENE

The Used-Book-Store Approach

IT STARTS OUTSIDE, IN A SMALL DEAD END OF A NARROW STREET. Surrounded by three brick walls, twenty-six shelving carts filled with books are aligned in two columns. On the two lateral walls, permanent shelves contain more books. On one wall, above the shelves, a mural in black and white, slightly peeling away, portrays famous writers. They include four poets: W. B. Yeats, Stevie Smith, Allen Ginsberg, and Dr. Seuss. On the carts and shelves, one-dollar, three-dollar, and five-dollar books are intermingled. Overlapping stickers delineate the curve of depreciation. I have never figured out any order or arrangement in the display, be it by size, subject, or author. Books have been stranded here as if by successive tides.

There is always at least one other scavenger. We don't talk to each other as we move from cart to cart, or from shelf to shelf, quietly and unobtrusively. We don't look at each other, but we are always aware of the distance between our bodies. We need this protective space around ourselves; it establishes the intimate and vulnerable relation between the reader and the book. Some of us look more like street people than others. Some of us are street people. Once a staggering man with a

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dirty gauze patch on his eye started to beg, after a brief pretense of browsing. All the people around him buried themselves in their finds, and the man staggered away. It was not so much that we did not have pity on him as that he had broken the etiquette of this place. Street people are welcome here as readers but not as beggars.

It is a freezing, bleak day in January, and I am looking for poetry. I see a few Chaucers, a few Shakespeares, and a hardcover, three-dollar *History of Modern Poetry* published in 1987. It opens with T. S. Eliot as the single founding father of Modern Poetry. But on this day, Modern Poetry is not on the outdoor carts, mixed with the cookbooks, spy novels, romances, political memoirs, biographies of unknowns by unknowns, out-of-date tourist guides, manuals teaching unheard-of techniques, odd ends of scholarship, and broken-up sets of the great classics of Western literature. A week later, after a recent tide of books, on one cart I find a cluster of one-dollar poets: Johannes Bobrowski, Horst Bienek, Eugenio Montale, Robert Friend, Federico García Lorca, Jules Laforgue, Yüan Hung-tao, Robert Lowell, and Yevgeny Yevtushenko. I choose the ones that fit inside the back pocket of my subway bag. I consider a three-dollar Ferlinghetti, which is hard to read because the print reproduces the author's handwriting and has an inconvenient format. It is titled *Tyrannus Nix?* and starts with "Nixon Nixon bush league president." Since it is another cold day in January, I do not exercise my right to hesitate before making a trifling decision. I pick *Tyrannus Nix?* and go inside.

Across from the wall of Fiction, next to Sci-Fi, Mysteries, and Westerns, Poetry occupies five shelves on the first floor. Today Poetry starts with Aaron and ends with Zukosky. In between lies a canon that is not immovable but changes slowly, by small touches of erosion here and accretion there. On the carts outside, books are collected like seashells. On the shelves inside, they have settled in sedimentary blocks, from which they must be extracted. If a stool or a stepladder is around, I sit and contemplate the sequence of fat and slim volumes: books by poets and books about poets, well-known and unknown authors. About Whitman, ten books; by Whitman, two books of prose and one massive, illustrated edition of *Leaves of Grass*. In the middle of the Whitman section is a paperback by Ruth Whitman. (Not bad, but ten dollars—and this time I can comfortably exercise my right to read without buying.) No books about her, which makes me think that she is probably alive. About Tennyson, nine books; by Tennyson, four books—including a strange volume of his complete poetry. Undated but probably from the 1930s, bound in dark-brown leather that is turning purple and embossed with thistles, it looks like a dirty missal. The founding father, T. S. Eliot, is absent as a poet: four books about him, one by him—a volume of letters. Paul Valéry is represented by two books, none of them containing his poems: one about him, *Paul Valery and His Critics*; one by him, *The Art of Poetry*, critical essays introduced by T. S. Eliot. Two exceptions must be mentioned: Dante towers as a poet, with nine books by him and four about him, while Petrarch achieves a more humble but better balance, with two by him against two about him.

I am puzzled by Dante's overwhelming presence and Petrarch's discretion. In my canon of poets, I would locate Dante in a different constellation, among the great ancestors like Hesiod and Lucretius, while Petrarch would be one of the founders of modern poetry, on a par with Eliot and Valéry, Yeats and Mallarmé. Sitting on a stool in front of a wall of poets, I can see both the necessity and the irrelevance of any canon. I am in Plato's cave, able to see only the shadows of poetry, which look so concrete that I cannot help believing in their reality and so incomplete that I cannot help wondering about what lies beyond. The

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used-book store, by displaying a caricature of academic and popular canons of poetry, reveals the basic conditions of our encounters with poems and poets. Poetry (more than any other literary genre) creates around itself a form of natural environment that reassures us about our sense of reality—paradoxically, as the myth of the cave does. We can then read poems to unsettle our sense of reality safely. This is perhaps one of the reasons that psychoanalytic and poststructuralist theories have not yet broadly provided a new way of reading poetry: they first need to convince us that their ways of unsettling reality are as powerful and safe as those of poetry. By going to the used-book store and contemplating its version of poetry as reality, I am not attempting to find a new way of reading poetry. I am unsettling further my shaky belief in my power to grasp poetry as reality. And I am reading poets I never read before.

After sitting for a while, I start to discern the architecture of the shelved space in front of me. Some blocks support the weight of the rest. The columns of Poetry in the used-book store are Blake, Browning, Byron, Chaucer, Coleridge, Dante, de la Mare, Dickinson, Dryden, Eliot, Frost, Keats, Milton, Montale, Pound, Sitwell, Spenser, Tennyson, Whitman, Yeats. The rest go in between, in clusters. Between Frost and Keats gather Gallagher, Goldbarth, Ginsberg, Hearth, Goethe, and Heine. Between Keats and Milton congregate Langland, Merton, Meredith, and Metcalf. Between Pound and Sitwell are Rilke and Rimbaud—buttressing each other, supporting a lone Shelley on their left. Walter de la Mare is a formidable poet in bulk.

Intimidated by these columns, I decide to look for specimens rather than masterpieces. Somewhere between Tennyson and Whitman, a slim bright-red book catches my eye: Jorge Teillier's *From the Country of Nevermore*. I learn from the back cover that Teillier is one of the best Chilean poets. I read at random:

Carta de lluvia

Si atraviesas las estaciones
conservando en tus manos
la lluvia de la infancia que debimos compartir
nos reuniremos en el lugar
donde los sueños corren jubilosos
como ovejas liberadas del corral
y en donde brillará sobre nosotros
la estrella que nos fuera prometida.

Letter of Rain

If you cross the seasons
holding in your hands
the rain of your childhood we should have
shared
we will meet again in the place
where dreams run joyously
as sheep freed from the corral
and where the star we were promised
will shine above us. (14–15)

The poet admits the possibility of eternal bliss as the corollary of an impossible condition. I accept his logic and approve of his bittersweet attitude toward love and dreams. I read another poem:

Para hablar con los muertos

Para hablar con los muertos
hay que elegir palabras
que ellos reconozcan tan fácilmente
como sus manos
reconocían el pelaje de sus perros en la
oscuridad.

To Talk with the Dead

To talk with the dead
you have to choose words
they can recognize as easily
as their hands recognized
their dog's fur in the darkness. (6–7)

I recognize these words as my hands recognize which one of my two cats is coming to sleep on my shoulder or stomach in the darkness. I recognize the words I seek when I meet my grandmother or my mother in dreams. I know that I know they are dead, but I am

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not sure that they know, and I am afraid to speak to them in a way that would frighten or pain them: "ellos son miedosos / como los primeros pasos de un niño" (6). Do I suddenly understand Spanish? No. I have to check in the translation what *miedosos* means: "fearful." I understand that my mother tongue is the tongue I am afraid to use with my dead mother. My understanding is not an understanding of the poem; it is an understanding through the poem of something I knew before only through the language of dreams.

Another day or the same—I feel that I have spent years on this stool—I pull down another book. On a pale ivory background, the cover displays an engraving of a blazing sun, a horse jumping from a rock, and, floating in the air above, a naked man trying to capture the horse with a lasso while a naked woman reads on a cloud. William Blake? I wonder. But the book is not by Blake, since I pulled it down from the group between Frost and Keats. No, it is by Albert Goldbarth, "Distinguished Professor of Humanities at Wichita State University," and is entitled *Heaven and Earth: A Cosmology*. Published by the University of Georgia Press, it is "supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency," and has received various awards. Goldbarth's poems are compact and relatively long. I start from the beginning:

The Talk Show

. . . in 1930, The Bell Telephone Company commissioned one of their employees, Karl Jansky, to find out why the new car radios suffered from static. Jansky set up radio antennae, and heard a steady hiss coming from the direction of the Milky Way. Radio astronomy was born thirty years later.

—JAMES BURKE

A woman "heard angels." The paper says
angels
sussurra'd her body, rang their praises
daylong
through its reedy places, stirred her
smallest water. And elsewhere, Larry
"Dude Man" Chavez raises his #2 wrench
indifferently overhead on the C-track
tightening line,
and feels something like lightning—only
there isn't lightning—beam to the wrench
head,
branch down his arm, make all of his muscles
electric feathers, then exit his other arm out
its guttering candelabrum fingers and into
the frame of the Ford. It's stored
there. (3; ellipsis in orig.)

I neither understand nor feel it, but I am caught in the trap the poet set for me, as if I were being carried away on an escalator. I have to read to the end, no matter what I perceive, understand, or miss during the ride. And I miss a lot. Nevertheless, I cannot be tricked by cosmologies; I know they are no more scientific than my approach is. They are spreading sparks and stars in all directions indiscriminately, for the sheer joy of abusing language and molesting received ideas. If I start it, I will have to finish it, and another poem begins:

Syzygial is a good word; *defalcation*,
exfoliate, *janizary*—good words, all,
although I don't employ them. I never say
gunnysack. . . . (7)

(I don't either, and here I have to stop before copying the rest.) A cosmology is a dictionary of the cosmos; therefore, Goldbarth is a poet-lexicographer. I buy *Heaven and Earth* in praise of lexicography—this most divine art—and to teach me unspoken English.

I am systematically skipping over the great columns of Poetry, until I realize I have browsed around Dickinson for a while without moving away. I know she was a nineteenth-century poet who dressed in white and lived in a small New England town. A perfect caryatid, stately, enthroned on her shelf with eleven books about her and four by her. I do not want to know any more about white dresses and reclusion, so I pull down a volume of her poetry—a sturdy modern edition for the general

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reader, published by "Courage Books, an imprint of Running Press Book Publishers, Philadelphia." I browse and meet a few birds, bees, and flowers. Then it is about the advantage of being nobody and having no name. Then something she remembers that she cannot remember. It is such a pregnant and frail web that I close the book, lest I break something by too heavy a reading. I place the book back on the shelf and go about my other business in the used-book store: mysteries. Another day I pull out the same volume and read:

> I had no time to hate, because
> The grave would hinder me,
> And life was not so ample I
> Could finish enmity.
>
> Nor had I time to love; but since
> Some industry must be,
> The little toil of love, I thought,
> Was large enough for me. (29)

This is pedestrian enough; I can retort without breaking china, without tearing apart fine lace. But beware of a poet's enmity that a whole life would not suffice to assuage. She would hate you so much that she would die before taking revenge or forgiving. It would not be worth her time. Don't trust a poet's love either—her hobby, her pastime when she is not more seriously occupied with the toil of watching you die. "I like a look of agony," she says softly, before explaining, "Because I know it's true" (72). Nothing is truer in human experience than death—the death of someone else. You should not miss any opportunity of witnessing "a dialogue between / The spirit and the dust" (83) or of opening an abyss of questions within yourself: "To know just how he suffered would be dear" or "Was it a pleasant day to die?" or "Was he afraid or tranquil?" (76). As a last gift, the dying beloved will offer you a question that can never be answered.

> I've seen a dying eye
> Run round and round a room
> In search of something, as it seemed,
> Then cloudier become;
> And then, obscure with fog,
> And then be soldered down,
> Without disclosing what it be,
> 'T were blessed to have seen. (74)

Be a patient and fastidious witness as she was, taking detailed notes to be turned into well-knit poems. Be impeccable and implacable: "The last night that she lived, / It was a common night, / Except the dying" (77). Don't wait until your own death, you won't see much of it, and the experience will be lame in comparison. Live your death fully in others' deaths, and then live it again in your imagination, staging it in various guises, learned by observation: "'T is dying, I am doing" (80). Be honest about it; don't mince words.

> I breathed enough to learn the trick,
> And now, removed from air,
> I simulate the breath so well,
> That one, to be quite sure
>
> The lungs are stirless, must descend
> Among the cunning cells,
> And touch the pantomime himself.
> How cool the bellows feels! (295)

If dead she can imitate life, how easy for her alive to imitate death.

I like her brutality, her lack of tact. She does not, like Jorge Teillier, care about the scruples of the dead and the sentiments of the living. She was promised another life in eternity and takes that promise seriously, asking the world, people, and God, How am I supposed to live with that promise in mind? If I were a believer, I would find her faith troublesome and her angels sinister. Her love for nature is another way to look at death, another exercise in deprivation for the soul. Robin and oriole, daffodil and clover, spider and bee, sunrise and sunset, hill and sea, all are cause for inexhaustible wonder and infinite pangs:

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> I dreaded that first robin so,
> But he is mastered now,
> And I'm accustomed to him grown,—
> He hurts a little, though. (157)

I heard such a limpid and frightening voice once before, in the writings of Simone Weil.

This is what I did during December and January: I went to the used-book store; I selected and browsed and tried to translate into my mental idiom languages I never learned. But I was not yet reading poetry—if reading means to find relevance in what we read or a connection between the world in which we live and the text that temporarily cuts us off from it (only temporarily, for it would be dreadful if we could never come back).

The Subway Approach

Where do people read? I read mostly at home, in various spots—but not in the bathroom, perhaps to keep one place where I don't read. I read a lot in my office and in libraries. I read sometimes in cafés, parks, and gardens and occasionally in planes, trains, cars, and waiting spaces. This year, because I moved to a different neighborhood, subway reading became part of my habits. For the first time in my life, I have to be in the subway for thirty minutes, twice a day, four or five days a week. One of the books I read entirely in the subway is Marc Augé's *In the Metro*, a delightful book for all readers and particularly useful for subway readers. Augé analyzes, but he also recollects, which enables his subway readers to make an experience of their own out of this most gregarious event.

Observing various activities done in the subway, Augé notes:

> If we look more closely, we cannot fail to notice that the activities of the subway traveler are numerous and varied. Reading is still prominent among them, mostly (although some lines are more intellectual than others) in the form of comic strips or sentimental novels of the Harlequin genre. Thus adventure, eroticism, or rose water is poured into the solitary hearts of individuals who apply themselves, with a pathetic constancy, to sealing themselves off from those around them without missing their stop. (34)

This is why I don't read novels in the subway: I would miss my stop, being one of these childish souls who can still absorb themselves in the lives of fictitious characters. Normal adults should not enjoy reading fiction beyond their fortieth (or was it thirtieth?) birthday, François Mauriac said. If he was right, I am not a normal adult. I have passed my fortieth birthday and still gulp large amounts of fiction. I know people who don't read novels anymore, preferring poetry, essays, history, grammars—any text avoiding the innate stupidity that suspension of disbelief never fails to produce. I silently recognize my innate stupidity and keep reading fiction, at home. On the morning train, I read things I ought to read for classes and meetings. On the evening train, I read poetry or nothing. In his remarks on subway reading, Augé does not mention poetry, apparently because Parisian travelers rarely read poetry on their metro. This phenomenon is also observable on the Boston subway, known locally as the T. In several months of using the T, I caught only two or three poetry readers other than me. The low number may come from the fact that few people read poetry anywhere, but I have another explanation to suggest: taking the subway is an experience similar to reading poetry. They share intense passivity, fleeting awareness, fragmented perception, loss of self, intermittent blankness, and a fluid sense of time. For the duration of the fare, travelers may sit or stand without making the effort to be somebody for somebody else. If fiction requires a suspension of disbelief, poetry requires a suspension of self-belief:

> I'm nobody! Who are you?
> Are you nobody too?
> Then there's a pair of us—don't tell!
> They'd banish us, you know. (97)

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Emily Dickinson considered being nobody a privilege shared by rare souls in exile. But she never took the T. She did not witness the peculiar withdrawal mass transportation induces in individuals. If she had had such an experience, would she have related it to poetry? I don't know. I can only say that if I answer her, "Yes, I am nobody too," it is not because I am a rare soul but because I am a T rider.

People taking the subway don't need any poet to fragment, erase, and silence their exhausted egos. Goldbarth and his moving sidewalk of words, Teillier and his delicate sense of displacement are in a sense superfluous here, for they repeat what you see and feel right now. However, poets can help to make sense out of the subway experience, and the subway experience can make poetry reading enjoyable in an unusual fashion. For instance, this winter I suddenly understood that "close reading" is not just a metaphor expressing an approach to poetry learned in the classroom. On the subway, I have even experienced "tight reading."

It is around 6:00 p.m. on 10 February 2003. I am on the Red Line. The car is not crowded. People are quiet and sparsely seated. I choose a seat in the middle, on the left-hand side, to have a good view of the river when the train crosses the bridge. Even at night the view is quite different depending on what side one sits or stands. I have enough room to easily arrange myself, along with the gloves, mittens, and hat in my white canvas bag. My black bag on my lap, I extend my legs and, feeling snug, take a book from the bag's back pocket:

The Pocket Poets Series

KADDISH
AND OTHER POEMS
1958–1960
★
ALLEN GINSBERG

Number Fourteen

The front cover is in black and white. I notice a number of red things in the car. In front of me, a red turtleneck on a little girl. A red plaid scarf worn by her mother. A bright-red down coat on an old woman. A red knapsack. A red wool hat. A red bag of pretzels the little girl is snacking from. Kaddish: proem, narrative, hymmnn, lament, litany, and fugue. It starts on page 7, ends on page 36. The old woman in red holds a book open but does not read. Kaddish. For Naomi Ginsberg 1894–1956. We are crossing the bridge. I should not miss the view, since for once I have a good seat. Clear dark sky, shiny frozen river, starry skyscrapers—I have seen that already. Or have I ever seen that, and will I ever see it again? The little girl is bored, and her mother is tired. They have red hair. That is, golden orange. The bridge is crossed. We enter the stop at Mass General Hospital.

> Strange now to think of you, gone without
> corsets & eyes, while I walk on the
> sunny pavement of Greenwich Village.
> downtown Manhattan, clear winter noon, and
> I've been up all night, talking, talking,
> reading the Kaddish aloud

The old woman puts her book away. She has a nice profile. I won't think of you. It's his mother, not mine. The little girl asks her mother, "What can I do to . . . you?" I don't catch the verb, and I don't hear the answer. I see the tired smile.

> . . . listening to Ray Charles blues shout blind
> on the phonograph
> the rhythm the rhythm—and your memory
> in my head three years after—

More people enter. I am aware and indifferent. That is the effect of mourning and the proper mood for close reading.

> No more to say, and nothing to weep for but
> the Beings in the Dream, trapped in
> its disappearance (7)

Exit the old woman who could not read. Enter a man without a jacket. Just a flannel shirt. No gloves, no hat. Sits down across from me,

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not far away. Talks to himself quietly. Rubs his hands. Shivers. Long, narrow, pale face. Deep-set eyes. Not altogether here. Calling for discreet glances. Not dangerous. To be pitied. It's so cold. I have to read a few lines again.

> . . . Lower East Side—where you walked 50 years ago, little girl—from Russia, eating the first poisonous tomatoes of America—frightened on the dock— (8)

Mother and daughter are feeding each other pretzels. The little girl, kneeling on her seat, presses her face on the window, pounds, and says in a mock scream, "Let me out of here." She resumes feeding her mother.

> . . . Immortality, Naomi?

I read as if I were listening to music. Kaddish is a song, a prayer, a humming, a scream. Naomi invisible but audible. Reversed pietà. *Stabat filius dolorosus lacrymosus*. No father except

> Nameless, One Faced, Forever beyond me, beginningless, endless, Father in death.

Who else is a father? Eugene? Max? Louis? Dr. Whatzis? Hitler? Pale, elusive, showing stamina only in their grief and Naomi's paranoia.

> Max grieves alive in an office on Lower Broadway, lone large mustache over midnight Accountings, not sure. (11)
> . . . . . .
> And Eugene, my brother, her elder son, away studying Law in a furnished room in Newark—
> . . . . . .
> He worked 8 hrs. a day for $20/wk—thru Law School years—stayed by himself innocent near negro whorehouses.
> Unlaid, poor virgin—writing poems about Ideals and politics letters to the editor Pat Eve News— (19)

The shivering man gets off at Park Street. For all his outlandishness, he seems to know where he is going, and he gracefully avoids a big woman entering the car before all the passengers have exited. Shame on her. I should start to prepare for my own exit. I read a little more to keep the sound in my ear—the sound of her mad life, now part of my life. My life does not sing to me. Screeching brakes of the train entering the stop at Downtown Crossing. My exiting technique is well drilled. Book in the black bag. White canvas on shoulder. March out between two rows of respectfully lined-up incoming passengers. Turn right, into the corridor. Pass the out-of-tune hippie and his acoustic guitar. Drop change in the guitar case. Climb the staircase against the stream coming down. Emerge on the Orange Line station platform. Find the right spot to board on the last car. Close to the rail tracks but not too close. Wait. I have time. The train is not yet in the other station. Stations are so close that the passengers on the platform of one station can see the passengers on the platform of the other. I have time to read more.

> First nervous breakdown was 1919—she stayed home from school and lay in a dark room for three weeks—something bad—never said what—every noise hurt—dreams of the creaks of Wall Street— (15)

Memory of a son. He remembers what happened before his birth. He remembers what she did not want to speak about. He remembers what she forgot. He does not remember her. He remembers her memory. He thinks her thoughts. He speaks her speech.

> "Allen, you don't understand—it's—ever since those 3 big sticks up my back—they did something to me in Hospital, they poisoned me, they want to see me dead—3 big sticks, 3 big sticks— . . ." (14)

Might have happened in his mind. Minds are porous. At the same time, we all turn our heads and bend over the tracks to see the train arriving in the other station. Four

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red lights and a small yellow one. A five-eyed worm. We travel safely thanks to its digestive capacity. Worms eat ground. We are the ground of the underground. Two steps forward, onto the dark tracks in front of the worm, and I would die mangled where I now see a mouse running out of a crack in concrete. Survival. Nothing else to praise in living creatures. Train arrives. We respectfully line up in two rows to let exiting passengers, with their bags, babies, boxes, and suitcases, march out to their various destinations. In a crowded car, I am good at finding a seat. I spot the hardly visible ones between two big persons, and I squeeze myself in. I can't read standing. I have learned the art of self-shrinking in a crowd as a protective measure against my fear of being crushed.

> "I'm your mother, take me to Lakewood" (near where Graf Zeppelin had crashed before, all Hitler in Explosion) "where I can hide."

I hide between two vast women dressed in black. One wears a leather coat and a nice hat. The other wears a padded, quilted coat and a shawl on her head. No smiles. Not one word. We form a solid female block with rounded outlines like an ancient multiple goddess: the Gray Ones who shared a single eye and a single tooth, or the Morrigan who was three and announced to men their death. We don't talk to one another because we are more ancient than conversation. We keep our hats and gloves on. Our bags on our lap. My book on the top of my bags. I open it broadly so they can read it with our single eye if they want to.

> "The Bitch! Old Grandma! Last week I saw her, dressed in pants like an old man, with a sack on her back, climbing up the brick side of the apartment
>
> "On the fire escape, with poison germs, to throw on me—at night—maybe Louis is helping her—he's under her power— . . ." (14)

Curses and fears. Nobody to be trusted. We are nobody to be trusted. Clasping our bags in our gloved hands on our padded lap. New England Medical School. More people get in. I am walled in by people. See elbows, knees, pockets, belts, buttons, zippers, body parts and their props. Fortunately, I am three in a block of silence and distrust. Naomi would shriek, "Let me out of here!"

> . . . —Help! Louis! Buba! Fascists! Death!—the landlady frightened—old fag attendant screaming back at her—

Nobody screams back at me. It's all in my head, Ginsberg's head, Naomi's head. Subway crowds, subdued and civilized. It's all in their minds, and they keep it for themselves. Self-shrinking into blankness, where a poem can be heard or written. Poems are not nice things to be delivered.

> Naomi at the prescription counter defending herself from the enemy—racks of children's books, douche bags, aspirins, pots, blood—"Don't come near me—murderers! Keep away! Promise not to kill me!" (17)

"Promise not to kill me!" Silent pleas we all beg from one another when we get so close—I could feel their heartbeats if not for our thick coats. Nobody will promise such a thing. It would mean that we thought about it. Back Bay. Change for the commuter rail. One of my Gray Sisters leaves. I slump. The crowd is thinner now.

> as you vainly made your lips more real with lipstick, looking in the mirror to see if the Insanity was Me or a carful of police. (28)

A small woman in jeans and a tailored wool coat stands in front of me. She holds the bar above her head with one outstretched hand, and since she is about my height, I know how painful her posture is. The seat next to me is empty. She does not want to sit or does not want to sit next to me. But she could at least

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hold the vertical bar near the last seat of the row, since it is not far from her and nobody stands in between. She remains hanging on her one outstretched arm, looking stoic. She has dyed her hair with henna; her bright-red lipstick is a little bit off. She is older than she looks at first sight. Stoic in front of age, she prefers to suffer. *C'est pas drôle de vieillir*, said my grandmother. I did not believe her because I had always known her old, energetic, powerful, dignified, fun. Ginsberg has always known his mother mad. Naomi becomes his Naomi through her madness. Powerful, energetic, dignified, fun, frightening, unbearable, lovable.

> One night, sudden attack—her noise in the bathroom—like croaking up her soul—convulsions and red vomit coming out of her mouth—diarrhea water exploding from her behind—on all fours in front of the toilet—urine running between her legs—left retching on the tile floor smeared with her black feces—unfainted— (22)

This is consecration with love. "Unfainted." Despite her body's betrayals, she is *invicta*, she is still here, she is still his mother, and she is still Naomi Ginsberg. Able to dictate her thoughts.

> Looking at naked baby pictures in the magazine—baby powder advertisements, strained lamb carrots—"I will think nothing but beautiful thoughts." (22–23)

In the subway, when ads display pictures of naked babies, it's to raise funds and concern for abused children; sick children; orphans; victims of wars, AIDS, hunger, poverty. In the magazines passengers read, there might be images supposed to inspire beautiful thoughts and the desire to buy beautiful things. People don't seem haunted by beautiful thoughts, though. Down the row of seats, I see a hand slightly extended. It is small and thin and wears a glove made of ivory-colored lace. I can't see the face. I can't see the body. I assume it's a woman's. That's all I will ever see of her—a fragment of beauty. I have to be content with that and look elsewhere for truth.

Ginsberg could put up with his mother's madness but not with her aging. What undid Naomi was age artificially prompted by treatments and a stroke. It would have happened anyway.

> Asylum spreads out giant wings above the path to a minute black hole—the door—entrance thru crotch—
>
> I went in—smelt funny—the halls again—up elevator—to a glass door on a Woman's Ward—to Naomi—Two nurses buxom white—They led her out, Naomi stared—and I gaspt—She'd had a stroke—
>
> Too thin, shrunk on her bones—age come to Naomi—now broken into white hair—loose dress on her skeleton—face sunk, old! withered—cheek of crone— (28–30)

Entrance of death to spare our sensitivity. The one we are going to lose soon is not the one we knew. It's a strange substitution we can never completely accept, although we pretend to—or do we?

> "The Horror" I weeping—to see her again—"The Horror"—as if she were dead thru funeral rot in—"The Horror!" (30)

At some point, my old grandmother became older than old. That was her way to help us to let her go. The eternal Naomi—Naomi *invicta*—is back as soon as the crone has died for her, leaving her intact from death.

> . . . —2 days after her death I got her letter—
>
> Strange Prophecies anew! She wrote—"The key is in the window, the key is in the sunlight at the window—I have the key—Get married Allen don't take drugs—the key is in the bars, in the sunlight in the window.
>
> Love,
>
> your mother"
>
> which is Naomi— (31)

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The crone was a mask hiding Naomi trumping death. Only the mask died. Naomi Died. She is Dead. And Death can now be celebrated.

> Blessed be Thee Naomi in Death! Blessed be Death! Blessed be Death! (32)

And god can become God again and make equal all sufferings and all mortal things and Death and death and language and sound and silence.

> Lord Lord Lord caw caw caw Lord Lord Lord caw caw caw Lord (36)

Stony Brook. That's where I exit.

The Rare-Book-Room Approach

21 March 2003. First day of spring. Third day of war. I went to the Houghton Library's reading room—a most democratic place, where anyone with a project can gain access. You cannot enter there just to look around. You need to have something to search for. But the gatekeepers don't ask you embarrassing questions about the relevance of your research. It only needs to be relevant to you. I had a small project in mind. A few months earlier, I had read *The Happy Birthday of Death*, a collection of poems by Gregory Corso, published in 1960. It contained "Bomb," a long *calligramme* in the shape of an atomic mushroom cloud. But on this day another poem by Corso had brought me to the Houghton Library:

> I HELD A SHELLEY MANUSCRIPT
> (*written in Houghton Library, Harvard*)

The only thing I had read by Shelley was the beginning of *Prometheus Unbound*, a poem I came across when I was looking for a quotation in a letter addressed by Robert de Montesquiou to Marcel Proust and dated 1919: "*Mais puisque vous l'avez voulu, je me suis d'abord rencontré moi-même dans votre jardin comme le mage de Shelley . . .*" 'But since you wanted it, I first met myself in your garden like Shelley's magus . . .' (392; my trans.). At the time, I stopped my reading of *Prometheus Unbound* at these lines: "Ere Babylon was dust, / The Magus Zoroaster, my dead child, / Met his own image walking in the garden" (1.191–93). I did not continue and forgot what went before. What stayed with me was Montesquiou's melancholy allusion to his approaching death.[1] In Corso's poem, Shelley also appears as a messenger of death and a double met by chance in a library:

> My hands did numb to beauty
> as they reached into Death and tightened!
>
> O sovereign was my touch
> upon the tan-ink's fragile page!
>
> Quickly, my eyes moved quickly,
> sought for smell for dust for lace
> for dry hair!
>
> I would have taken the page
> breathing in the crime!
> For no evidence have I wrung from dreams—
> yet what triumph is there in private credence?
>
> Often, in some steep ancestral book,
> when I find myself entangled with leopard-
> apples
> and torched-mushrooms,
> my cypressean skein outreaches the recorded
> age
> and I, as though tipping a pitcher of milk,
> pour secrecy upon the dying page.

My research project was to find out what Shelley manuscript Gregory Corso held and was tempted to steal in the Houghton Library some forty-five years ago.

In the card catalog I found a small stack of cards listing "Shelley, Percy Bysshe." I selected manuscripts containing poems, assuming that Corso's hands would not have been numbed by letters. I requested two items and waited. In the reading room, a dozen patrons were at work. Three librarians were on duty, and seven portraits were on the walls—adding a layer of

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gentility to a room that could have been a salon in an earlier time. High windows, a quiet light, and a big clock stuck in a bull's-eye opening in the back room. The clock's mechanism was on display. I could see the long hand moving slowly and smoothly. I was not impatient.

A librarian brought me a manila folder and a thin bound volume.[2] The folder contained one sheet of paper with five lines of verse, one line of musical notation, one line of interjections, a doodle, and six more lines of verse—all in pencil and in Robert Frost's hand, as the label clearly explained. Nothing in Shelley's hand. The reason it had been cataloged under Shelley is that, after writing a stanza for his poem "My November Guest," Frost added a stanza from Shelley's "To the Moon." I had hoped that it was an autograph manuscript of Shelley's that Frost had acquired and annotated. Instead, what I had under my eyes was a peculiar poem, copied here (minus the musical notation and the doodle):

> My sorrow when she's here with me
> Thinks these dark days of autumn rain
> Are beautiful as days can be
> She loves the bare the withered tree
> She walks the sodden pasture lane
>
> One! Two! Three! So!!—No good. Come
> back—
> come back.
>
> Art thou pale for weariness
> Of climbing heaven and gazing at the earth
> Wandering companionless
> Among the stars that have a different birth—
> And ever changing like a joyless eye
> That finds no object worth its constancy.

When pencil subsumes faded tan ink, one poet's moon becomes another poet's guest. But this had nothing to do with Corso, and I could not allow myself to be carried away by a series of poets who read other poets, from Corso to Shelley, from Shelley to Frost, and from Frost to who knows? I could not call this thin thread a "cypressean skein" and spin it, hoping it would lead me outside the maze. I had to find a short cut.

The thin bound volume I opened next was titled "Shelley letters and manuscripts / George Edward Woodberry Collection." A clipping from an old book review of John Galt's *Life of Lord Byron* (1830) was attached to the first page. This consisted of an excerpt of the book, telling the story of Shelley's death. I copied a few lines: "Mr. Shelley was found near Via Reggio, and, being greatly decomposed, and unfit to be removed, it was determined to reduce the remains to ashes, that they might be carried to a place of sepulture. Accordingly preparations were made for the burning." Above the clipping, a piece of white paper was folded and glued like an envelope, in such a way that its contents would not fall out. On it was written in pencil, "From grave of Shelley Dec. 1st [18]80." Was I going to find ashes or, as Corso expected, smell, dust, lace, or dry hair? The folded paper contained a dried, fragmented leaf of clover and a small disk—the size of a dime—made of a shiny yellow-greenish material and glued on paper. It was a fragment of something—of a seal? a ceramic ornament? Found on Shelley's grave, like the clover leaf, it had no use, no beauty, no meaning. But it had been carefully deposited in the rare-book room. Did Corso see it? I was led to another dead end by the materiality of posterity. So far, the rare-book room seemed to provide fragmented elements of a cult of dead poets. Once, on the floor above the reading room, I had visited a charming shrine: the Emily Dickinson Room. Why do we need poetic shrines? Is not the main virtue of poetry that it resists ossification, remaining a living language that does not need to be preserved in a reliquary? I always thought that, being at least a modern, I did not yield to any form of worship of Poets and Poetry. But at this moment I started to wonder whether, under the pretext of research, I was trying to establish the ritual relation to the "real thing" that any researcher cannot help looking for.

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Besides the keepsake from Shelley's grave, the Woodberry volume contained five poems copied by Mary Shelley and two letters by Shelley himself. I could read part of her writings; I could hardly read any of his strokes of ink, and I was not numbed by these expensive gray sheets of paper. I dutifully copied the title and first line of each piece:

To L——d E——n

Thy country's curse is on thee, darkest Crest

To—

Corpses are cold in the tomb—

A Dirge

This morn thy gallant bark, Love,

Summer and Winter

It was a bright and cheerful afternoon

The Tower of Famine

Amid the desolation of a city

Pisa—Dec 11. 1821

My dearest friend

Lerici, June 15 1822

Gentlemen,
Be so good as to send a credit for my quarter's income

Because of the pious collage Woodberry had accomplished in this volume, the Shelleys' writing about death and destruction seemed about as casual as writing to one's banker. Woodberry added yet another detour. So forget Woodberry. Go back to Shelley, the Shelleys, and Corso—no intermediaries, the true thing. At last I would be able to kill the great tradition of British Romantic poetry and the great generation of American beat poets with one stone. And perhaps find some peace with the world as it is today.

I requested the Harvard Shelley Notebook,[3] thinking that the librarian would not allow me to touch it without a special authorization. While my request form was processed, I imagined the arguments that would convince a higher authority to let me hold the notebook in my hands—if necessary, my gloved hands. Should I tell them about Corso? Would that seem serious enough? What sort of urge should I invoke? What intellectual craving? What scholarly necessity? My true reason in requesting the notebook was to repeat a gesture made by a poet toward another half a century ago in this very room. I too wanted to say, "I held a Shelley manuscript." This was a miserable argument. Scholars are not supposed to put their hands on manuscripts for the sake of reenactment; they are supposed to study manuscripts with the least amount of contact possible, in order to add evidence to the edifice of knowledge. Since I could hardly read Shelley's handwriting, I was unqualified for the task—and thus it occurred to me that Corso probably did not read the manuscript he held either. His poem indicates not reading but holding, touching, watching, and musing. The quest for a poem as the real thing does not necessarily lead to fetishism; it can lead to iconoclasm as well. The last lines of Corso's poem—"and I, as though tipping a pitcher of milk, / pour secrecy upon the dying page"—suggest the temptation of erasing the monument of poetry that a manuscript of Shelley's in a rare-book room is.

Suddenly the notebook was in front of me. I did not know what to do. Its yellow cover had turned gray with grease and dust. My motivations were weak and my spirit low. I was tempted to call back the librarian: "I was just kidding. I don't really want to see this manuscript. . . ." But then I realized that nobody around me seemed to have noticed how unauthorized my presence was. I only had to authorize it myself. I got a lectern and a couple of booksnakes. I could now open the notebook. The verso of the front cover had been used for doodles and additions. It also contained a sort

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of motto: "Be strong, live happy & love." The first poem copied was "The Sensitive Plant" and the last one "A Ballad." Handwriting changed; it was hard to say when it was Mary's and when it was Percy's. I could hear Shelley (Mary or Percy) cursing his or her quill while copying "To a Sky-Lark." The first three lines were blotted, and the rest became thinner once the quill had been fixed. The notebook showed me that poetry is made of the energy of a mind transferred to a hand; it contains all the accidents that such an energy transfer encounters on its way. As anecdotes—"Shelley cursed his or her quill" or "Corso was tempted to tear a page from a Shelley manuscript"—these accidents present no interest. As variables, they remind the reader, lost in a maze of erudite inklings, that critical reading is mastery—not denial—of the accidental. Corso's gesture toward Shelley was not critical, for it reiterated an accidental encounter presented as a moment of truth: "My hands did numb to beauty / as they reached into Death and tightened!" Tightened around what? The "what" is the question that the critic addresses and the poet eschews. Shelley's skylark is as elusive as Corso's Shelley manuscript. It is not something that can answer the question, What is this?

> In the golden lightning
> Of the sunken sun,
> O'er which clouds are bright'ning,
> Thou dost float and run;
> Like an unbodied joy whose race is just begun.
> (100)

Both the poet and the critic escape their deadly passion for the real thing—be it called art, beauty, truth, language, or theory—by using opposite strategies. The poet creates an object (a poem) that contains no object and that avows this lack. The critic identifies a poem as an object containing no object and describes it as precisely as possible without attempting to create a new object of the same kind. A critical description would have been my task if I had undertaken work on Shelley or Corso or their confluence. But I had not yet committed myself to such a task. For me the Shelley notebook remained a liminal place between dreaming and writing.

I turned its pages. I could read a few words and a few lines, but I mostly looked at the poems as pictures. Meaning was lost. Language was wrecked. And not for any abstruse theoretical reason. With training I would be able to read their handwriting, rescuing meaning and language at once. But I enjoyed my lacunal reading. In particular, I admired a poem filling seven and a half pages from edge to edge, with lines of strokes and hatching surely in Percy's hand.[4] This is what I saw on the first page:

> A Vision of the Sea
>
> —Tis the / / / / of Tempest..... the rags of the sail
> / / / / / / / / in / / / / / within the / / / / / gale
> / / / / the / / / / / / / / / / / / / / / / rain / / / / /
> / / / / / / / / / / is / / / / / / / / a deluge / / / / / /
> / / / sees the black / / / / / / / / / / / / / / / / / /
> / / / / / as if / / / / / / / / / was / / / / / / / / in / /
> / / / / / / / / / / to sustain with / / / / / / / / / /
> / / / / Ocean / / / / / / / / / / / / / / /—they pass
> To / / / / / / / / in the Deep / / / / / Earthquake / / /
> And / / / / / / / the thunders made silent / / /
> / / / / / / / / / / echo. / / / / / / / / / / / / / / / / /
> / / / / / / / trailing / / / / / / / / / / tempest is lost
> / / / the skirts of the thunder / / / / / / / / / / / /
> Of the / / / / / / / / / / / / / / chasm of the deep
> / / / / / / walls of the / / / / / / / / / / / / / /
> / / / / / / / / / / / / / / calm are / / / / / / / / / /
> / / / / / / / of ruin hang gleaming about,
> While / / / / / / / / a chaos / / / / / like a rout
> Of death- / iron
> With / / / / / / / / / / / / the black Ship / / / / /
> / / / / / / / / / / / / / / from a mine / / / / / / / / / (61)

It was as if I overheard a soliloquy delivered outdoors during a storm or, less romantically, snatches of conversations in a noisy café. A printed edition would remove the background noise and enable me to fill in the blanks. But my reading would still be unequal: some words would stick out, and some would van-

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ish as soon as they were read. Did I ever read a poem completely? On this page written in Shelley's hand, no matter how many words I missed, I could decipher his fear of death and the sea. I could also recognize my own twin fears of emptiness and fullness. I was trying both to read and not to read Shelley, to avoid two forms of mental agony: invasion and isolation. His fears should not become mine; his language should not invade my inner world. But if I was able to transform his poem into an illegible form, all language was in danger of becoming incomprehensible to me. That language is at stake in poetry was not a new idea for me, but I had never felt it so personally. My own grasp on language was at stake in my reading or nonreading of "A Vision of the Sea." However, nobody around seemed to realize how dangerous it is to hold a Shelley manuscript in the reading room of the Houghton Library. I was in a stormy state of mind, but everything was quiet around me. The danger was not that great. The whole library protected me against falling into a heaven of absolute legibility or a hell of absolute illegibility. In between, there surely were many ways of reading poetry that did not imply deep mental disorientation.

I closed the Shelley notebook. I had not encountered the real thing, whatever it was, but something had happened to me. It was nothing tremendous, like meeting one's first love or one's first dead. It was just a slight displacement of objects in my mind. Poems had moved closer to my fears and farther away from my obsessions. In this different configuration, the expansive Shelley met the retentive Paul Celan.

BLITZGESCHRECKT, unverwandelt, kaum
gestraübt:
Géricaults
Pferd,
schon
von deinen Nadelblicken geheilt
über und über.

Noch hier in diesem
Gewitter
reitest du's zu.

Ein Trittstein, noch fern deinem Fuß,
winkt mit der einen
rötlichen
Strähne aus meinem Bart.

LIGHTNING-SHOCKED, unchanged, scarcely
ruffled:
Géricault's
horse,
already
healed by your needle-glances
over and over.

Even here in this
thunderstorm
you break it in.

A stepping-stone, still far from your foot,
waves with the one
reddish
strand from my beard.

Celan was one of the most difficult poets I ever read. I remained stuck on one poem, one line, or one word. If I moved on, I felt as if I had read nothing. If I lingered, I felt I was read by the poem. I was not as afraid of being invaded by its language as I was in front of Shelley's flow of lines, but I was afraid of becoming an object like the reddish strand, the stepping-stone, or Géricault's horse. A dreadful little thing pointing toward something much more frightening. My attempt to approach poetry through Shelley's manuscript was certainly a scholarly failure, but it probably was a correct move toward Celan's poetry.

I may return to the used-book store in the summer. I may take the subway without reading. I may sit in a reading room without reading. I may forget the war. I may not forgive the war. I may look at words in stupor. I may stare at words with anger. I may regretfully progress. I may purposefully regress. I may listen to a skylark that never sang. I may worship a manuscript—a dead piece of skin. I may forge,

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erase, exhume, or mistrust a poem. I may conjure or dismiss a poet. I may repeat the poet's gesture and beg for scholarly mercy. I may feel irrelevant or relevant indifferently. I may read poetry with both fear and tranquillity.

Notes

I thank Alan Greene and Charles Bernstein for their support and help in the writing and revising of this article.

[1] Montesquiou died of uremia two years later. He also met his double, the baron de Charlus, in Proust's novel.

[2] The Houghton call number of the document in the folder is bMS Am 1690, and that of the volume is fMS Eng 822.

[3] Houghton call number: MS Eng 258.2.

[4] Woodberry confirms my impression that this poem is written in Percy's and not Mary's hand (9). On this notebook and others of Shelley's, see also Massey.

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