

## Book Notes: Reading in the Time of Coronavirus

By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence  
Dr. Andrew Roth

### 'Gleanings' from Contemporary Poetry

Originally in this week's *Book Notes*, I had intended to ask, "What does Donald Trump share with *Beowulf*?"

The answer to which is "more than you might think," none of which is particularly flattering to *Der Trumpster*. In revisiting Seamus Heaney's magnificent translation of *Beowulf*, one discovers one thing and rediscovers several others.

The discovery is that the almost unreadable entry in many a high school and college Gen Ed English required course syllabus, *Beowulf*, is actually a beautiful – one might say almost sublime – work of art.

The rediscovery is that authoritarianism's roots reside deep, very deep, in human culture, perhaps in human nature. Those roots go back past recorded history into the mists of human's hunter-gather origins and the band, clan, or tribe's need for protection. They go yet further back to troops of chimpanzees and gorillas needing an alpha male to protect them from marauding invaders.



The alpha male – the war lord – the warrior king protecting the realm antecedent to Thomas Carlyle’s “great man theory” of leadership has bedeviled and beguiled many a thinker down to the present. The earliest record of that in English literature is *Beowulf*, that bane of many an undergraduate.

But, in rereading *Beowulf*, I made yet another rediscovery – the beauty of Seamus Heaney’s poetry. And that rediscovery got me to rummaging around in my library of contemporary poetry – largely American, but not only.

And, like anyone puttering around in his library, I immediately wanted to share a few things.

So, (which, by the way, the declaratory use of “**So**” to begin a statement or paragraph is an ancient Hiberno-English-‘Scullionspeak,’ to quote Seamus Heaney, rhetorical device that “operates as an expression which obliterates all previous discourse and narrative, and at the same time functions as an exclamation calling for immediate attention.” [1]) The scop – the oral bard – reciting to those gathered in the mead hall begins *Beowulf* with “So...”, which is to say, “Quiet – listen”:

So. The Spear-Danes in days gone by  
and the kings who ruled them had courage and greatness.  
We have heard of those princes’ heroic campaigns. [2]

So, alas, we’ll save *Beowulf* and *Der Trumpster* for next week. This week I want to share some gleanings from my rummagings in contemporary poetry. Many years ago, in what seems at times like another life, I was an English professor before I wandered off into media studies, then marketing, then college administration before resurfacing doing a bit of American history and teaching leadership. As an apostate English professor, poetry was/is my passion. All poetry - but I developed a special interest in contemporary American poetry.

It is hardly an original observation, but this, by which I mean the past 50 to 60 years, could arguably be called the “golden age” of American poetry. Certainly, quantity is not an issue. The Internet is awash with versifiers, some worth the effort to find; others best left in their quiet anonymity.

The best boss I ever had was my first boss. John Rouch chaired the Gannon English Department when I joined it in 1970. As we started WERG, the Gannon Radio station, (there was no Communications Department in those days) I had a program featuring jazz and what was then known as underground rock music interlaced with book and movie reviews. One Saturday I lambasted some long-forgotten film, but I’ve never forgotten John’s advice.

He said to me “If it’s that bad, then why don’t we let it die its own quiet death. Find something to praise.” So (there’s that ‘So’ again cutting off discourse), I’ll spare you one of my favorite rants against contemporary poets so neurasthenic, so solipsistic, so agonizingly into themselves that they approach a mute scream of “*ME ME ME ME...*”

My taste runs to the limpid line so clear, so precisely apt that it can only be what it is. It not only shares with you a perception, but it recreates that perception with such clarity that you become one with it seeing what the poet sees.

It eschews (a terrible but apt word) merely *telling* and obscurity.

It celebrates *seeing* and showing.

It brings you into itself. It shares with you the aesthetic experience.

It shares the epiphany.

Although, as in any age, the quality is uneven, poetry, particularly rock lyrics and rap, is everywhere. The Nobel Prize never meant what some think it means; more than a few clunkers have garnered the honor. But so too have most of the worthiest writers of the past century, dynamite having found some vindication in the halo of their genius. As for rock/folk/blues/pop lyrics, Bob Dylan received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2016 “for having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition.” [3] Richard Thomas, who offers a freshman seminar on Dylan at Harvard, *FRSEM 37u:Bob Dylan*, quotes Dylan singing from 1965’s “*Desolation Row*” “on the Stockholm waterfront on the evening of the medal award”:

And Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot  
Fighting in the captain’s tower  
While calypso singers laugh at them  
And fishermen hold flowers. [4]

Not sure there is an epiphany there, but from time to time, I think Dylan is the greatest poet of his generation (if you want to feel time passing, born in 1941 Dylan flirts with 80). More than a few others, however, can stake their claim to that distinction. Chief among these rests Seamus Heaney.

It’s Heaney’s *Beowulf* we will look into next week, but Heaney, who also received a Nobel Prize, writes with that clarity, that mastery of language that draws you into his world so you see what he sees. “*Digging*,” the very first poem in Heaney’s collection *Opened Ground*, shares with us the moment Heaney found his vocation:

Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.

Under my window, a clean rasping sound  
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:  
My father, digging. I look down

Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds  
Bends low, comes up twenty years away  
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills  
Where he was digging.

The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft  
Against the inside knee was levered firmly.  
He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep  
To scatter new potatoes that we picked,  
Loving their cool hardness in our hands.

By God, the old man could handle a spade.  
Just like his old man ...

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap  
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge  
Through living roots awaken in my head.  
But I've no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests.  
I'll dig with it. [5]

Working different turf, there is Kathleen Graber's "*The River Twice*," in which the poet shares a fragment of a mundane day:

*The Love of Jesus* is a thrift warehouse on the south side of town. Everything inside is a dollar. On Mondays & Fridays, everything is fifty cents. A stormy afternoon in June & I drift for hours down the aisles: bread machines & coffee pots. Shirts  
& shoes. Teetering stacks of mismatched dinnerware. [6]

I have a friend who loves John Milton. It's a love I only occasionally share, but it rekindled last year re-reading *Paradise Lost* when I caught myself exclaiming "Damn, the man can write!" But others tend to agree with Yvor Winters, who in a

history of English prosody included Milton in a footnote, saying something to the effect he didn't trust people who put words into the mouth of God.

It's a sentiment Gary Snyder, the last of *The Beats* still standing, having turned 90 on May 8, shares. From "*Milton by Firelight*":

“O hell, what do mine eyes  
    with grief behold?”  
Working with an old  
Singlejack miner, who can sense  
The vein and cleavage  
In the very guts of rock, can  
Blast granite, build  
Switchbacks that last for years  
Under the beat of snow, thaw, mule-hooves.  
What use, Milton, a silly story  
Of our lost general parents,  
    eaters of fruit? [7]

Snyder was a “hippie” – no, actually, that's not accurate. It's too reductionist. Snyder is the 20th & 21st centuries' Thoreau, except he didn't send his laundry home to his mother. First, working as fire-watcher in the northern California wilderness, then as a student at the great Zen monastery in Kyoto, Japan, and then being true to himself and his vocation, Snyder was countercultural before there was a counterculture.

Like Jack Gilbert, who we read in an earlier ***Book Notes*** available [here](#), Snyder was no dilettante. True to himself, true his craft and calling, Snyder took it all the way. "*Milton by Firelight*" comes from his years working on logging and mining crews in the Pacific northwest; "*Hay for Horses*" emerges from his years as a farm laborer. It's one of my favorites; the life arc it evokes portrays more than a few people all of us know. I'll take the liberty to quote it in its entirety:

He had driven half the night  
From far down San Joaquin  
Through Mariposa, up the  
Dangerous mountain roads,  
And pulled in at eight a.m.  
With his big truckload of hay  
    behind the barn.  
With winch and ropes and hooks  
We stacked the bales up clean  
To splintery redwood rafters

High in the dark, flecks of alfalfa  
Whirling through the shingle cracks of light,  
Itch of haydust in the  
    sweaty shirt and shoes.  
At lunchtime under Black oak  
Out in the hot corral,  
--The old mare nosing lunch pails,  
Grasshoppers crackling in the weeds –  
“I’m sixty-eight,” he said,  
“I first bucked hay when I was seventeen.  
I thought, that day I started,  
I sure would hate to do this all my life.  
And dammit, that’s just what  
I’ve gone and done.” [8]

In a future **Book Notes**, we will drill deeper into the rich mine of Snyder’s work. For now, Ted Kooser, who, like Snyder, finds the magical in the ordinary. Anyone who has spent anytime at all on a college campus has seen this “*Student*”:

The green shell of his backpack makes him lean  
into wave after wave of responsibility,  
and he swings his still arms and cupped hands,

paddling ahead. He has extended his neck  
to its full length, and his chin, hard as a beak,  
breaks the cold surf. He’s got his baseball cap on

backward as up he crawls, out of the froth  
of a hangover and onto the sand of the future,  
and lumbers, heavy with hope, into the library. [9]

We visited with Mary Oliver in a previous **Book Notes**, which can be [here](#), Oliver, like Kooser, has the gift of *seeing*, most often in her meditations on the natural world, but frequently when musing about history in the unlikeliest of places. As in, from her **American Primitive**, “*An Old Whorehouse*”:

We climbed through a broken window,  
walked through every room.

Out of business for years,  
the mattresses held only

rainwater, and one  
woman's black shoe. Downstairs

spiders had wrapped up  
the crystal chandelier.

A cracked cup lay in the sink.  
But we were fourteen,

and no way dust could hide  
the expected glamour from us,

or teach us anything.  
We whispered, we imagined.

It would be years before  
we'd learn how effortlessly

sin blooms, then softens,  
like any bed of flowers. [10]

Or, from a different perspective, Li-Young Lee's "*Dwelling*":

As though touching her  
might make him known to himself,

as though his hand moving  
over her body might find who  
he is, as though he lay inside her, a country

his hand's traveling uncovered,  
as though such a country arose  
continually up out of her  
to meet his hand's setting forth and setting forth.

And the places on her body have no names.  
And she is what's immense about the night.  
And their clothes on the floor are arranged  
for forgetfulness. [11]

Or, yet another perspective, from Sharon Olds' "*First Boyfriend (for D.R.)*":

We would park on any quiet street,  
gliding over to the curb as if by accident,  
the houses dark, the families sealed into them,  
we'd park away from the streetlight, just the  
faint waves of its amber grit  
reached your car, you'd switch off the motor and  
turn and reach for me, and I would  
slide into your arms as if I had been born for it,  
the ochre corduroy of your sports jacket  
pressing the inside of my wrist,  
making its pattern of rivulets,  
water rippling out like sound waves from a source ... [12]

A marvelous poet, Olds' frank explorations of female sexuality, as in the *Woman* section of her 1980 ***Satan Says*** (University of Pittsburgh Press) can unnerve most males and set women's teeth on edge, but no one has ever said her woman's reconnoitering's from the old sexual give-and-take are false.

Stephen Dunn presents yet another perspective, as in "*The Man Who Never Loses His Balance*":

He walks the high wire in his sleep.  
The tent is blue, it is perpetual  
afternoon. He is walking between  
the open legs of his mother  
and the grave. Always. The audience  
is fathers whose kites are lost, children  
who want to be terrified into joy ...

The tent is blue. Outside is a world  
that is blue. Inside him  
a blueness that could crack  
like china if he ever hit bottom. [13]

Well, no editorializing today; just sharing. Let's end with what might be called an ode to our times – maybe an ode to the spirit of America. Not that noble spirit embedded in our founding documents and echoed on national holidays, but that spirit animating our ever so commercial souls. Here is Dana Goia's "*Money*":



*“Money is a kind of poetry.” – Wallace Stevens*

Money, the long green,  
cash, stash, rhino, jack  
or just plain dough.

Chock it up, fork it over,  
shell it out. Watch it  
burn holes through pockets.

To be made of it! To have it  
to burn! Greenbacks, double eagles,  
megabucks and Ginnie Maes.

It greases the palm, feathers the nest,  
holds heads above water,  
makes both ends meet.

Money breeds money.  
Gathering interest, compounding daily.  
Always in circulation.

Money. You don't know where it's been,  
but you put it where your mouth is.  
And it talks. [14]

So, some gleanings from rummaging in my library. I hope you enjoyed them, or some of them. Next week – Der Trumpster meets ***Beowulf!***

-- Andrew Roth, Ph.D.

*Scholar-in-Residence*

The Jefferson Educational Society

[roth@jeserie.org](mailto:roth@jeserie.org)

## **End Notes**

1. Heaney, Seamus. "Introduction", **Beowulf: An Illustrated Edition**. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2008), p. xxii.
2. Ibid., p. 3.
3. The Nobel Prize in Literature 2016. NobelPrize.org. Nobel Media AB 2020 available at <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2016/summary/> accessed July 14, 2020.
4. Thomas, Richard. **Why Bob Dylan Matters**. (New York: Dey Street/William Morrow, 2017), p. 15.
5. Heaney, Seamus. "Digging", in **Open Ground: Selected Poems 1966-1996**. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), p. 3.
6. Graber, Kathleen. "The River Twice", in **The Best American Poetry 2014**. Ed. Terrance Hayes. (New York: Scribner Poetry, 2014) p. 57.
7. Snyder, Gary. "Milton by Firelight: Piute Creek, August 1955", in **Riprap & Cold Mountain Poems**. (San Francisco: Four Seasons Foundation, 1977), p. 7.
8. Ibid., p. 13.
9. Kooser, Ted. "Student", in **Delights & Shadows**. (Port Townshend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2004), p. 8.
10. Oliver, Mary. "An Old Whorehouse", in **American Primitive**. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1983), p. 39.
11. Lee, Li-Young. "Dwelling", in **The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Poetry**, Ed. J.D. McClatchy. (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), p. 585.
12. Olds, Sharon. "First Boyfriend", in **The Gold Cell**. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), p. 48.
13. from Dunn, Stephen. "The Man Who Never Loses His Balance", in **New and Selected Poems: 1974-1994**. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994), p. 73.
14. Goia, Dana. "Money" from [danagioia.com](http://danagioia.com) available at <http://danagioia.com/money/> accessed July 15, 2020