

English 205

Poetry Journal

January 21, 2009

Elizabeth Alexander had high expectations on the day of President Barack Obama's inauguration. As the media had consistently reminded us, it was a historic day; a day close to the hearts of many people across America and around the world. And to commemorate the day, along with celebrations music and speeches and prayer, Obama decided to follow in the footsteps of former presidents John F. Kennedy and Bill Clinton in electing a poet to write an occasional poem as a tribute to the beginning of what will hopefully be a successful presidency.

Although I do not remember the build-up surrounding Maya Angelou's or Miller Williams' inaugural poems, I could not imagine them to have had similar expectations to the one written and read by Alexander. This could perhaps be attributed to Obama's reputation of giving powerful and eloquent speeches, the sheer fluency of which make him a tough act for anyone to follow (and I say that as a John McCain supporter). Regardless, on the day of delivery, I believe Alexander failed to meet any of her expectations.

Alexander's precious "Praise Song for the Day" was lackluster and dull. It was essentially a parade of truisms and trite language dressed with a bit of rhythmic variation. From the very first line, Alexander recites cliches ("Each day we go about our business") and stock-phrase chestnuts ("I know there's something better down the road"), causing her verses to sound like lackluster duplicates of a thousand other American poet knockoffs with an English minor or an MFA from an accredited university. Her lyrics begin as a series of jumbled ideas about the grandeur of the everyday man ("A farmer considers the changing sky. A teacher says, 'Take out

your pencils. Begin.") only to disappear into further cycles of disjunction. The poem's argument is as hard to remember as its language, so that when we finally reach the great question of the poem, "What if the mightiest word is love"?, we are already so far astray that even Republicans begin internal chants to "bring on Obama" so they can hear a cohesive, authentic display of words.

But all this aside, the poem could perhaps have been saved from its platitude with an inspired and passionate delivery, which, in true form, Alexander also failed to deliver. Standing at the podium in garments of rouge, Alexander delivered "Praise Song for the Day" with the monotony of an automobile GPS. Though her words were spoke precisely (a smart move considering the size of her audience), her slow and impassive recitation caused the whole event to feel unauthentic, as though they weren't her words at all. She seemed to strive for that Aaron Copeland size sweep of the American folk experience, but lacked the voice or style to pull it off. The poem dragged on, eventually losing its audience.

I understand that it is not an ordinary occasion that a poet is able to recite his or her poetry to millions of people worldwide, and I guess this instance can be seen as a further reason why it should remain that way. The colorless citizen reviews, gathered amongst the hackneyed praise from the liberal press, only further embeds among the American people that a poet's place is not on the platform but amongst the crowd, taking in the godsend of the days and turning it into poetry from the heart, not poetry for the bank.

January 23, 2009

When I was assigned to read "Sir Patrick Spens" and present it to the class, I was weary. The medieval wording and unorthodox pronunciations made me think it would be a terribly difficult read. However, upon my first reading, I found it to be a simple, singable folk ballad with a catchy rhyme scheme and fun, engaging lyrics.

Upon my first reading of the first stanza, I found it almost humorous. I imagined the king "Drinking the blude-reid wine" to be a drunken baboon of a ruler, making loud, obnoxious orders from his throne, liberally drinking goblets of wine as his knights and council watch with cloaked disdain. And of these punch-drunk cries of nothingness, the king calls a sailor to "sail this schip of mine." Thus, an "eldern knight," in an effort to appease the king (and hopefully end the droll, inebriated discourse) suggests that he send Sir Patrick Spens, for he "is the best sailor / That ever sailed the main."

Upon my second reading of these opening stanzas, I found them to be coated with gloom. I noticed the king's "blude-reid wine" to be a foreshadowing of Sir Patrick Spens' imminent death. His drunkenness became a topic of tragedy, not of humor. It perhaps was a symbol of power for the king, that he has the resources to regularly drink wine while ruling his nation. It makes the king a much darker figure to think that he may have sent Sir Patrick Spens to his death with the knowledge of the mission's danger; that it wasn't a product of his inebriation. Perhaps that could be the explanation for Spens' irregular reaction to the king's orders to sail the sea, for at first "A loud lauch lauched he," but after reading a few more lines a "teir blinded his ee." At first Spens thought the king's letter was a joke, because no sane man would sail through such a fierce storm. But when he realized the seriousness of the king's request, he immediately foresaw his death.

What interested me most about this poem was that it was Sir Patrick's reputation that became his undoing. His universal title of being "the best sailer / that sails upon the se" is what ultimately put him against the forces of nature. It made me think whether the king knew about the impending storm, its danger, and sent Sir Patrick regardless, or whether he was just ignorant. And thus, being a conspiracy theorist, I considered whether the elderly knight had a vendetta with Sir Patrick, and by suggesting him to the king was his chance at retribution. However, I dismissed this theory, considering the knight's suggestion to be merely an knight's effort to gain favor with the crown, and Sir Patrick's tragic death to be a product of chance.

The remainder of the ballad is particularly touching, from Sir Patrick's pseudo-religious queries about fate ("O wha is this has don this deid, / This ill deid done to me.") to his tragic pleas to the king's conscious, asking to be relieved of his deadly duty. But nevertheless, Sir Patrick, with a crew of nobles, sails valorously into the storm. And in a Hollywood-esque ending, the crew's families wait longingly for their return, for any sign that their loved ones are still alive, any sign that they are still trekking with Odysseus-like valor and strength, still trying to come home.

But life, like this poem, is not a fairy tale. Like in James Cameron's melodramatic replay of the sinking of the Titanic, the young, seafaring protagonist lies lifeless at the bottom of the ocean, "fiftie fadom deip." The poem was tragic and fun, funny and sad. But above all, it was a touching and warm story about courage and loyalty; courage to accept one's fate in the face of death, and the loyalty to fuel it.

January 24, 2009

This might be an unusual journal entry, but I would like to comment on an abstract from a poem presented as an example in Gardner's Western Wind: An Introduction to Poetry. It comes about in a discussion of the age-old advice given to all young writers in grade school: "Show, don't tell."

In one example, taken from *The Canterbury Tales*, poet Geoffrey Chaucer does not simply tell us that a certain person is a treacherous hypocrite, he shows us by describing the individual as, "The smiler with the knife under the cloak." I thought this abstract is not only a beautiful example of "show, don't tell," but a beautiful image in itself. I can perfectly envision a man from Chaucer's epoch (the fourteenth century), smiling to his contemporaries while secretly plotting their demise, thus smiling at them while holding the instrument of their murder safely beneath his cloak.

Perhaps this image struck me as significant because it is still relevant today. People still put up fronts to hide their true intentions, making one consider who is their friend and who is their enemy, and if there is even a difference. So many people today exploit each other for their own intentions, such as in the recent Bernie Madoff scandal. And these greedy people are successful in their exploitations because they are able to hide their face behind a mask. They hide their knife beneath their cloak, and smile to the crowd, because only behind one's painted smile lies one's true intentions, locked away until doomsday.

January 27, 2009

Tonight I read Robinson Jeffers' "The Perse-Seine," a metaphorical narrative about the beauty of a school of sardines being netted at night. The poem is basically an apocalyptic

prophesy about how progress and government are essentially strangling men into their own demise, a theory I particularly connect with because of my distaste for the sciences and my fondness of apocalyptic literature.

The first thing I noticed upon reading this poem was that the first stanza contained many references to light (or lack thereof). Jefferson uses the terms "daylight," "moonlight," "dark of the moon," "phosphorescence," "milk-colored light," and "gleaming" to describe the various aspects of sardine fishing; aspects he calls "beautiful... and a little terrible."

He compares these lights and this process (the process of capturing sardines by surrounding them with a purse-seine net and dragging them to the surface) to a city of humans. He notes that he was "looking from a night mountain-top / On a wide city, the color of splendor, galaxies of light" and asks of himself, how could I help but recall the seine-net / gathering the luminous fish?" In the same fashion that he describes the process of capturing the sardines, he notes "how beautiful the city appeared, and a little terrible."

I interpreted this metaphor, during my first reading, to be a reminder that human civilizations are doomed to the same fate as the school of sardines. The author notes that people have "geared the machines and locked all together into interdependence," that they have "built the great cities" and now are unable to escape this apocalyptic fate. I particularly liked this image because I wholly agree with it. For many years now I have found myself culminating a strong distaste for science, a distaste that caused me to struggle through many high school classes. It is irrefutable that scientific advancement has reproduced exponentially over the years, yet despite all of the interconnectedness that it has promised, I feel that all it has accomplished is alienating people and creating dependency on outside sources. It has produced great technologies and

innovations, great technologies that promised to unite us, such as the telephone and the computer. These are the "geared machines" that Jeffers claims have "locked us all together into interdependence," because although these advancements have united us, they have also divided us and made us helpless. Every person on this globe is now electronically connected, yet people feel utterly alone. Is it any wonder that humans now feel more depressed and defeated than they have at any point in human history?

"These things," Jeffers notes, "are Progress." The advancement of science has produced the same sensation in most humans: that we are moving forward. However, every step we take forward is another step toward our ultimate demise. We all become dependent, whether on government or technology or other people, such that each person becomes "in himself helpless." Whether in anarchy or tyranny, or somewhere in between, Jeffers reaches the same conclusion as the millions of other apocalyptic writers, that "there is no reason for amazement" amongst people, because "one always knew that cultures decay, and life's end is death."

January 28, 2009

Today in class we had a great debate over Emily Dickinson's poem "My Life Had Stood-- A Loaded Gun." And although there were many great subjects that were debated upon, the one that struck me as the most significant was whether the poem is actually a metaphor, or whether it is simply a poem about a gun. This struck me as an odd question because the purpose of this poetry class (and of most English classes, for that matter) is to interpret and analyze the subtle intricacies of various works of literature. If Kate's interpretation was to be correct, it would make everything just seem like a hoax.

When I first read "My Life Had Stood--A Loaded Gun," I found it to be metaphorical and touching. Indeed, it did simply describe the relationship between a man and his gun, told from the perspective of the gun. The narrating gun summarizes its existence alongside its owner, how "The Owner passed--identified-- / And carried [it] away," how they hunted amongst the mountains, and how at night, the gun would "guard [its] Master's Head."

I immediately saw the relationship between the man and his gun to be romantic, and thus identified the gun to be a woman, perhaps Dickinson herself. The story in itself is beautiful, particularly the scene where the gun guards her master at night:

And when at Night--Our good Day done--

I guard My Master's Head--

'Tis better than the Eider-Duck's

Deep Pillow--to have shared--

It reminds me of the values instilled in me by my parents, that family must protect family, and that they always be there for each other. This is especially prominent in the next line, where the gun states, "To foe of His--I'm deadly foe--." I was taught to protect my family regardless of the situation, because family does not side against family. Perhaps it is because of my personal connection which many of the gun's values that made the gun seem very human to me; human enough to be considered a metaphor.

The last stanza, where the gun ponders its "life" after the death of its owner, is particularly touching. The gun states:

Though I than He--may longer live

He longer must--than I--

For I have but the power to kill,

Without--the power to die--

Anyone who has been in love, or who even believes in the power of love, will attest that it is beyond difficult to think of life without their love. It may be an age-old literary cliché that has been replayed endlessly through movies, songs, and greeting cards, but it is nonetheless true in every which way.

It is not only its human characteristics that make the gun in "My Life Had Stood--A Loaded Gun" appear to be a metaphor for a girl, but also its human emotions. Its longing, loyalty, affection, and ultimately its love for its owner make its relationship more human than many human relationships currently are. Thus I find it difficult to imagine that Dickinson was simply writing about a gun. It may just be a product of the many similar values I share with the gun, but I think Dickinson was trying to transcend merely the man-gun relationship by writing this poem. I think she was making a statement about love, loyalty, trust, and ultimately the relationship between a man and a woman.