Poetry as Conversation

By Don Royster, Library Technical Assistant.

CONTINUE HERE. This conversation in Western Civilization began with Homer and King David. There were others before them. But they were the first superstar poets.

David wrote the Psalms. Poets such as John Donne and Gerard Manley Hopkins used David as a template. Leonard Cohen framed his “Hallelujah” with the Psalmist in mind. And Jane Kenyon’s “Let Evening Come” shows us the kind of trust in a greater spiritual reality the Psalmist had.

Had Homer not composed “The Iliad”, the world war that was the Trojan War would be forgotten. He also gave us “The Odyssey”. Odysseus, known to the Romans as Ulysses, spent ten years struggling to get back home to wife and son. Then the ancient Greek poet, Sappho, shouted out with her poems, “What about the women?”

Virgil created his "Aeneid" to give the Romans an epic like Homer’s. In “Ulysses”, Alfred Lord Tennyson, imagined the old hero nostalgic for the glory days. John Keats read an English translation of Homer and composed the sonnet, “On First Looking Into Chapman’s Homer”. James Joyce used the myth of Odysseus for his great novel, “Ulysses”.

Sometimes poets disagree with one another and sometimes they agree to disagree. For instance, Robert Frost might shout out to Walt Whitman, "Your poems are too wordy." Whitman comes back, "Yours are not wordy enough." Emily Dickinson, who knows this is a ridiculous argument, says, “Oh, pooh.” Then she goes on penning her haiku-like masterpieces.

And sometimes one or two lines of a poem can lead to entirely different poem. Two of our greatest poets, Geoffrey Chaucer and T.S. Eliot had differing views of the month of April. Both lived in times of stress. For Chaucer, it was the Hundred Years War with France and the plague, the death of his wife and money stolen from him in his capacity as a government agent. Yet Chaucer sets the mood of his “Canterbury Tales” with these opening lines in his Prologue: “When April with his showers sweet with fruit / the drought of March has pierced unto the root / And bathed each vein with liquor that has power / to generate therein and sire the flower.”

For Eliot, it was World War 1 and the Spanish Influenza epidemic, the mental breakdown of his wife and his debt to the U.S. Government for unpaid taxes. Add on top of that the English weather in April. Eliot used the template of “The Canterbury Tales” and pilgrimage for his great modernist poem, “The Waste Land”. Yet his poem is not optimistic. He opens his poem with this line: “April is the cruelest month, breeding…”

There is no definitive evidence that Eliot’s poem influenced Allen Ginsburg’s “Howl” when he wrote the opening line: “I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by
madness, starving hysterical naked, / dragging themselves through the negro streets at
dawn looking for an angry fix, / angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly
connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night...” Quite a few times
Ginsberg let it be known that he was influenced by Walt Whitman and William Blake
(Schmidgall, p.131). But one can also speculate that Ginsberg was influenced by Eliot
as well. According to Elliott Troop, there are a number of parallels in the two poems,
such as alienation, cultural anxiety and “the horror of worldwide warfare”.

We forget that we too can carry on a conversation with poets as well. A poem or a poet
can carry us through our times of deepest trauma and sorrow. As she faces death from
cancer, Vivian Bearing, the main character in Margaret Edson’s play “Wit”, finds deep
comfort in the poetry of John Donne, especially his “Death Be Not Proud” (Sykes, p.
163).

After the tragedy of 9/11, three poems steadied me through those awful days. W. H.
Auden wrote his “September 1, 1939” shortly after Hitler invaded Poland. In “When
Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d”, Walt Whitman mourned for Abraham Lincoln.
Elizabeth Bishop created her “One Art” when she lost her lover, Lota de Macedo Soares.

But it is not just for times of tragedy I read poetry. There are poems that marked the
celebrations of my life. Sometimes I read a poet like Edward Lear or Ogden Nash just
for a good laugh. Sometimes I want to see words dance on the page. And sometimes
it’s helpful to know there are other human beings going through the same things I am
going through.

This is why I daily go to the website, poems.com. Each day a new poem is thrown up
on the website. Not every poem is to my liking. But not every piece of music or movie is
to my liking either. I can go a week or two without reading a poem I particularly care
for. Then I read a piece and go, “Wow. That sure made my day.”

So join the conversation. You never know what poem will rise up inside of you and land
on the page.

References


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