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Longfellow's Ghost: Writing "Popular" Poetry

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Nineteenth-century poets—Lydia Sigourney, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and others—had something precious that we latter-day poets have lost. They had readers. They had *thousands* of readers. Ordinary people not only read poems such as "The Charge of the Light Brigade" but read them aloud and committed them to memory. By pointing this out, I do not mean to express nostalgia for the days of drugless dental work, bad roads, and compulsory schoolroom recitation. But I do wish to suggest that we can profit (though not monetarily—that's hopeless) by thinking more carefully about questions of audience. My poem "Asphalt" was written for my grandfather's funeral, but I want to consider it not as an elegy but as a *social act*, a poem aimed at a community of readers (or in this case, auditors) who are themselves neither poets nor aspiring poets. This is not a matter of moving from, say, the college poetry workshop to the slam bar; it's rather about moving into realms (imaginatively, and sometimes literally) where people do not expect good, original, contemporary poetry at all. At best, picturing poems as social acts can help poets to understand their poems not just as forms of self-expression but as other-directed events that connect audiences to themselves and to one another.

Literary theories of reception often emphasize the "dialogical" nature of meaning; that is, meaning is an unstable phenomenon produced by the author and (re-)produced by the reader. In other words, writers begin texts and readers finish them—and in finishing them, revise the meanings of texts to match their readerly expectations and wishes. But the reader is never simply an abstract ideal; reading always takes place in a specific setting that reflects specific cultural values. Poets and poetry readers are, on the one hand, happily diverse in terms of race, gender, and sexual orientation, but "we" have this in common: most of us are aligned with and /

or dependent upon educational institutions. We often delude ourselves that these institutions are not really relevant to our work as poets, hence the "great divide," most recently bemoaned by Marjorie Perloff, between literary critics and practicing poets in English departments.[1] But the fact remains that most poetry reading these days takes place in colleges and universities, and this means that readers are likely to have some of the following traits: (1) they are reading the poem on the page rather than just hearing it; (2) they are willing to work to decode fairly obscure metaphors and allusions; (3) they want to "succeed" as students or teachers; and (4) they have internalized (at least for school purposes) a "high cultural," as opposed to a "popular cultural," aesthetic, valuing innovation over repetition, difficulty over accessibility, and ritualized dissent over consensus. I hasten to insist that none of these traits are "bad," since, as an English professor, my own reading habits reflect them. But it's worth pointing out, with a little help from our nineteenth-century counterparts, that there are other ways to write and read poetry.

Longfellow's poems, for example, were typically read aloud rather than silently. As a writer, he did not ask his readers to decode challenging metaphors; instead, in a poem like "The Village Blacksmith," he constructs the metaphor of "the forge" and then carefully explicates its meaning for his readers:

> Thanks, thanks to thee, my worthy friend,
> For the lesson thou hast taught!
> Thus at the flaming forge of life
> Our fortunes must be wrought;
> Thus on its sounding anvil shaped
> Each burning deed and thought.[2]

Moreover, Longfellow did not shy away from clichés. His ideal readers were not working (as students or teachers) and didn't necessarily want to work hard at poetry; they appreciated familiar tropes over unexpected images and ideas. And precisely because Longfellow and his ilk were so widely popular and visible, this type of rhyming, predictable verse is still what springs to mind when many people (outside of colleges and universities) think of "poetry."

In beginning undergraduate poetry workshops, there are often a few "naive" poets who write from within a nineteenth-century popular aesthetic. A typical poem by such a poet might begin:

On the steady road of life,
We are walking, full of strife,
Hardships soon will come our way,
Night falls on the sunlit day.

Such student poets are slowly acculturated into a more sophisticated understanding of how poetry works. They learn to ditch the rhyming dictionary, to banish clichés, and (if I may quote one cliché we have yet to banish) to "show, don't tell." But as these students become more sophisticated academic poets, they also drop the assumptions that informed much nineteenth-century verse and that made poetry a popular art. Clichés, after all, are common cultural codes that bind people together in a shared understanding of their world. And many, if not most, people like to hear rhyming, resonant, reassuring poetry.

As I contemplated the likely audience at my grandfather's funeral, I had to rethink my own assumptions about the function and reception of poetry. I had to balance two value systems: the "academic" and the "popular." I was writing for a "popular" nonacademic audience, rather than simply for the purposes of self-expression or aesthetic pleasure, and I did not want to write a poem that emphasized my own quirks and intellectual preoccupations. The originality that is so prized in academic settings would seem incongruously self-aggrandizing during a funeral, which is, after all, a ritual of collective mourning. At the same time, I did not want to write doggerel; I wanted to honor my grandfather's particularity, not his generic qualities—and to do him honor, I needed to draw on, while simultaneously revising, my own understanding of what makes a "good" poem.

"Asphalt," then, is the result of a balancing act, and it remains one of the few poems I have written for a specific community of people. Its opening line recalls an old chestnut of nineteenth-century recitation culture (though one actually written in the 1790s), "John Anderson, My Jo," by Robert Burns:

John Anderson, my jo, John,
When we were first acquent;
Your locks were like the raven,
Your bonie brow was brent;
But now your brow is beld, John,
Your locks are like the snow;

> But blessings on your frosty pow,
> John Anderson, my jo.[3]

Burns's poem is charmingly archaic and reads well aloud. One way to write accessible poetry is to engage with the popular tradition that "John Anderson, My Jo" represents. In "Asphalt," I begin with a nod to Burns, addressing my grandfather directly. An early version of the poem actually retained the phrase "my jo," but I ultimately dropped it because Scottish dialect seemed out of place in a poem about a Swede. I did maintain, however, what Annie Finch has called "the ghost of meter" even as I moved away from Burns's archaic elements:[4]

> Harold "Andy" Anderson, grand
> dad, you were a crack shot, touch jerky,
> and so tan that all winter it seemed
> you were just back from a dream
> vacation. Why, if the midnight sun
> burns twenty-four hours in Sweden,
> are Andersons so white?

My poem retains the idiosyncratic details that I value as a contemporary poet, but its internal rhymes, straightforward images, and celebratory tone (stressing consensus rather than dissent) implicitly address an audience that wants to be comforted, not challenged. And like Longfellow, I end with a fairly explicit announcement of the poem's theme: "My roads run / Out of yours, Harold Anderson." Thus, while the poem has an aesthetic dimension, it was also able to serve a pragmatic social function when I read it at my grandfather's funeral.

WRITING PROMPT

Nineteenth-century people used poems as social texts, not just at funerals but also at political gatherings, banquets, holiday celebrations, and in many other places. Inspired by this tradition and by my own experience with "Asphalt," I offer the following writing prompt in closing: Write a poem for a group of people who are not poets, a poem to be read to a gathering of children, at a family holiday celebration, at a political meeting, at a wedding or a funeral, or in some other social context. Use language and images that this particular group will appreciate, even as you retain your own sense of what makes a "good" poem.

ASPHALT / *Angela Sorby*

Harold "Andy" Anderson, grand
dad, you were a crack shot, tough jerky,
and so tan that all winter it seemed
you were just back from a dream
vacation. Why, if the midnight sun
burns twenty-four hours in Sweden,
are Andersons so white? You alone
browned, as you worked pouring asphalt
downtown, then steamed yourself red
at night in the full body steamer
with only your head sticking out,
like John the Baptist's, on a platter.
When I come home to Washington
in summer I drive over blacktop
that glitters darkly in the industrial
district around the Port of Seattle.
You are not there, among the warehouses
full of office supplies, but if you were alive
you'd steal me a box of pencils.
No CEO, not you, but you poured
terra so *firma* that my roads run
out of yours, Harold Anderson.[5]

Notes

1. Marjorie Perloff, "President's Column: Teaching in the Wired Classroom," *MLA Newsletter*, Winter 2006, 3–5.

2. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *Selected Poems* (New York: Gramercy, 1992), 20.

3. *Robert Burns: Selected Poems* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 157.

4. Annie Finch, *The Ghost of Meter: Culture and Prosody in American Free Verse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 82.

5. Angela Sorby, *Distance Learning* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: New Issues Press, 1998), 37.