

**#POPPOETRY: the Unsurprising Nature
of the Culture of Poetry in the U.S.**

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It is remarkable that the great masters of prose have almost always also been poets, be it publicly or only in secret, in the 'closet'; and verily, one writes good prose only face to face with poetry!

– Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (trans. Josefine Nauckhoff) §92

I. INTRODUCTION: THAT WHICH SHOULD BE ASSUMED

Once upon a time

Yes, that has been said before. But it is as good a way to start as any.

And yes, that too has been said before as well.

Still –

Once upon a time not so long ago there was a blog, a blog about writing and reading poetry; and on that blog there was a post about a poem. And it came to happen that that post rather irked the poet who wrote the poem. So much so, the poet felt something needed to be done. So, he replied to the post on the blog, and in his words he let it be known that, generally speaking, this would not stand, and something needed to be done. And in the following exchanges of reply on his part and response on the part of the blog-writer, he made to do that very something.

Until there came the point where the blog-writer knew there was nothing more to be said to the poet. “Except,” that blog-writer added in departure, “this was all very interesting on its own, in that

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you felt something needed to be done, and in how you did it. There is something worth exploring here. So I will off to do that; and, when I am done, I will on this blog post those explorations, to see if what happened here is as interesting to anyone else as it is to me.”

This essay is that exploration.

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I have the want to start with a quotation. I usually try to avoid such – it is a gimmicky way to get to third gear. But occasionally there is honest, rhetorical value to it, so I am daring the practice. I do have a place to go from out of it. In fact, at least two.

It is from Paul Fussell’s *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*, the opening words to the chapter titled “Some Critical Implications of Stanzaic Forms”:

It should neither surprise nor distress us that most poetry in English ranges from the mediocre to the very bad and that most poets are technically incompetent. So are most waiters, physicians, carpenters, lawyers, gardeners, and teachers. The genuinely successful poems to which we return again and again constitute a tiny selection from the vast and almost measureless rubbish heap of the centuries. Anyone with access to a good library who has read assiduously in the now entirely unrecalled poetic effusions of the last three centuries – the sort of poems that no anthologist, no matter how silly, would think of collecting – is in a position to estimate the importance of formal technique in redeeming a poem from oblivion.¹

Now, one might think that opening with a quotation from this particular book is a cue that somewhere beneath this essay there lies the belief that formal verse outranks and will always outrank free verse in the realms of poetry. Which is absolutely not the case. In truth, my use of this quotation is wholly of happenstance: chance

¹ 154, rev. ed. (Random House, NY) 1979. First published 1965.

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had it that I was reading Fussell when I began thinking about this essay. And nothing more. Yet, some people, I am sure, would still insist the bias does and will yet here exist, simply in that I was reading that particular book – an entirely false conclusion even within the context of the quotation itself. Fussell is not at any point in his book arguing that formal verse is superior to non-formal verse. Rather, what he is arguing (to give it one form of expression) is that a poet who has developed proficiency and sophistication in formal technique and understanding is going to be a better poet than that same poet without such proficiency and sophistication, irrespective of what kind of verse they ultimately write. Not because they will instill even in their free verse some presence of formality, but because an artist who understands and works out of their medium will always find more effective and engaging results than an artist who does not.

Which is an astoundingly important idea: a rather fundamental idea for poetry (and literature) in the broad, and a central idea for my project in the specific. But that is not the immediate direction I wish to take from out of the above quotation.

Rather, where I want to go comes out from the very first words of the quotation: “it should *neither surprise nor distress us.*”

For it shouldn't. In truth, if such an idea does surprise or distress a person, they are either naive, unknowledgeed, or in obstinant denial. The phrase is well known, if not often said because of its impact: *99% of anything is crap.* (I'll refrain, and stay PG.) The percentage offered will vary from person to person (and is in the end irrelevant to the idea), but the notion, the understanding of culture (and profession) that is carried in the phrase is a conclusion everyone will come to once they dare to give a look: in any field of endeavor, be it gardening, or carpentry, or doctoring, painting, or poetry, the *exceptionally large majority* of it will be mediocre at best.

This, I would argue, is particularly true with poetry and literature. Why? Because poetry is about language. And language is a medium immediately available to everybody and in continuous

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use by everybody. All you need is a piece of paper and a writing utensil and you can make poetry. To be a painter – to be nearly anything else in all of civilization – requires first of all that you go out to the store and actually buy the supplies: which seems like a small thing, but is a hurdle sufficient enough to weed out from the start a large body of would-be bad painters, for it puts in the path to the endeavor a first question: “is this going to be worth the monetary expenditure?”

Second of all, the far majority of I’m-thinking-about-it painters would also carry into the decision the knowledge that merely buying the supplies would be wholly insufficient to their becoming a painter of any degree of mere competency: they would accept from the start the onus that they needed *some amount* of instruction, from whatever source, be it formal classes, self-bought books on the subject, or a kind man painting happy trees on PBS.

There are no such obstacles to poetry: even should that initial purchase be necessary, it is miniscule in cost; and language, well, everybody talks all the time. Competency is met once the people most commonly spoken to can understand what is being said. It is a remarkably easy thing to be a poet: you need only be able to write, to know what a line break is, and to have a thought or emotion you want to express. In truth, to meet minimum qualifications for the status of “poetry,” all you need is a couple, three line breaks and the word “love.” *Voilà* – poetry is brought to being.

With painting, in the minimum, you have to spend time merely training the muscles in your hand how to hold and wield a brush. And beyond that a bit of practice to figure out how to get the gobs of paint being smeared upon the canvas by your brush to look like a tree, or a rock, or whatever you might intend and be able to manage. There is a learning curve even to the point of the painter’s own satisfaction in their own abilities with verisimilitude. With poetry, if you want to speak of a deer standing alone beside a great, granite rock, you need only those words.

As such, I would posit, where with most endeavors “99% of

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anything is crap” (which is really to say mediocre at best), with poetry the number hyperbolically approaches 99.99.

Am I arguing that people should stop writing poetry? That the poetry community should be actively trying to point out to the greater body of poets, “I hate to be the one to tell you this, but you suck; please stop”? No. Indeed, I would argue, from a different angle, I am saying the very opposite. There is something good in that poetry has about as expansive an invitation to participation as can be found. And that goodness derives from out of that poetry – and literature – has importance far greater than cultural value. Yes, the more people reading it, and the more writing it, the better for any society. But more importantly, the more *a person* is reading it, and the more a person is writing it, the better for that person. However, that “better” does not lie within the mere acts of writing and reading. Rather, it lies in the development of sophistication – which is to say *sophistication of the self* – that always rests, in potential, within those acts, if the individual dare make the effort to mine it.

Why?

Why is poetry and literature of such greater importance – both in its writing and reading – than everything else?

Why does the accusation that “99% of poetry is crap” matter so much that it should hang on the wall of every poetry workshop?

Why should it be (to inverse Fussell) that *it should distress us* “that most poetry in English ranges from the mediocre to the very bad”?

(1) Because the attitude of acceptance waters down the concept of and struggle for sophisticated in the world of poetry, which creates a culture of poetry where the mediocre is praised and brilliance becomes all the more difficult an achievement. And this may seem tinged with elitism, except for what inevitably, logically, follows.

(2) Because working with language is more than a creative endeavor: it is how we engage the world, our society, and our selves. When the idea of sophistication in poetry is being watered down, so also is sophistication in language being watered down

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(both in general and, more importantly, within the educational arena), which *directly and inevitably means* so also is sophistication in *thought* being watered down, and as such so also is the sophistication of the human person *as an individual self* being culturally watered down.

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But I have passed by the turn-off which would take me to the body-proper of this essay. Where the road we are on is paved by “ranges from the mediocre to the very bad,” the desired turn-off sits at the word “most.” Ultimately, the turn-off will lead us to the same fields of play as does the road first followed, above, though to different corner from a different direction. The commonality will be found, within this essay, through that word *sophistication*.

Just as readers of this might have prematurely and falsely concluded that the quotation above was argument by Fussell, or that the use of the quotation above was argument by me that formal verse is inherently more sophisticated than free verse, so also you might be concluding here, at this moment, that sophistication means for me something like quantifiable standards, or some linear charting of performance, or a particular style or method of poetics – an idea equally false. The importance of sophistication lies not in the “measurement,” as it were, of a person’s sophistication; rather, the importance lies in the very endeavor for sophistication. (I use “endeavor” there with intent, to link it to its previous use, above.) For not only is poetry an endeavor, but so also is sophistication in its abstract form: indeed, the goal and process of sophistication is sophistication itself. That is, *sophistication*, here, in this essay, is far more an *action* than a characteristic.

Ergo,

It should neither surprise nor distress us that *most* poetry in English ranges from the mediocre to the very bad and that most poets are technically incompetent.

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Though, I admit, it is probably not immediately apparent why.

Here is the turnoff –

Any endeavor that is not focused on sophistication in that endeavor will neither, in turn, have effect on the sophistication of the individual self. Sophistication is an *endeavor*, not a product. Cessation in that endeavor brings about diminishment. As such, contrary to what we might want to believe, 99% of anything is actually depreciative, attenuating, even detrimental to the development and sophistication of the self, intellectually, psychically, and spiritually: in toto, aesthetically.

It is an intrinsically literary idea that reading is inherently beneficial. And, obviously, intellectually, it is. Though, literature, and especially poetry, makes a claim to something higher: they stand on a tradition of art, of beauty, of the rarified air of elevated thought wrought in heightened language. Literature – and the arts as a whole – is upheld as demonstration of that which raises humankind above the animals, of that which is most precious and most beautiful within the human race. And poetry, even in its more quotidian forms, lays claim to that heritage, quality, and desire. Even political poetry, which strives to anchor itself in the ideologies of time and place, by *being poetry*, still intentionally taps into and withdraws from that heritage and standing in want to raise their texts out of the material and into – or at least towards – the celestial.

So it is quite a thing to say, then, that 99% of all poetry is *merely conventional* – that the accusations are true, and irrespective of their claims 99% of all editors and publishers are, actually publishing the same thing, the same poems, the same banal thoughts writ in mediocre (if not technically incompetent) style; poems representative of a mass whose striving is not sophistication, but duplication, replication; poems that find their value not in being remarkable, irruptive, spiritual, *beautiful*, but in resting safely within the expected. (With enough variety to give lip service to the idea of “creativity”; but not so much so as to be of poor decorum.)

Yet, that is the inevitable conclusion of recognizing the existence

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of any established culture, including the culture of poetry in the U.S.: especially in that it is a culture that is ever increasingly invested in its own importance, as is readily evidenced by the growingly ubiquitous MFA industry. Though, “conclusion,” there, may be wholly the wrong word. For this is not the result of argument – it is the norm. It is what is and should wholly be expected within any culture’s nomos. Let me be clear: there is no indictment here that the MFA-industry has intentionally created a culture of acceptable (and expected and awarded) mediocrity within poetry. Rather, what I am saying is that the energies that have established and that are manifested within the MFA industry are an absolutely natural occurrence within a nomic culture such like that of poetry culture in the U.S. (I use the word “industry” intentionally, to say it is not just a cultural but also a financial enterprise, including the departments within which the MFA programs are found, and the universities owning those departments.) There is nothing about MFA culture, or the greater culture of poetry in the U.S., that is not what might wholly be expected within an established, nomic culture. It just so happens this one concerns poetry and literature; and it just so happens that it manifested contemporarily in the manner of the MFA industry. As such, I am not focusing solely on MFA programs: rather, I will be hear talking about the entirety of the culture of poetry and its normalizing energies: include the editorialship, publishing, writing, award giving, the social and academic systems by which the culture establishes its leadership and its authorities – leadership and authority which hold their positions because they reinforce and are no threat to the culture of the nomos; leadership and authority which *must* then support and replicate the social mores, lest they lose those positions of leadership and authority.

Again, let me be clear. My argument here is not a *j’accuse*. It is rather a far more sedentary *well, of course, that is how it is. Duh!* Of course the culture of poetry (and literature) is just as susceptible to conventionality and nomic definition as is every other culture, and

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of course the culture of poetry, once established, will strive on its own to maintain stability and cultural identity. That is the nature of culture: it establishes that which it is, and then it defends that which it is: we are us; we know what we are in that we are us; we praise our selves in that we are us; and we are successful in that we are us.²

It needs to be said – more accurately, it needs to be *spoken* – that poetry is going to fall in the greater part at any time into conventionality: which means Fussell’s statement above, and the essays in critique of contemporary poetry such as Marc Edmundson’s recent essay in *Harper’s* (essays which the poetry culture will and must always lay assault to, to the degree they are a threat to their nomos-provided identity and stability), are not in the end arguing a peculiarity: they are stating, each in their own way, and not always cognizantly, what is a fundamental truth: 99% of anything is crap; and the culture of that anything will not be about the outlying 1%, it will be about the far more popular 99. And that 1% will thus be marginalized, hidden, refused access, or when all else fails, re-characterized as something more like the 99 than not: for that 1% will not only be more challenging and demanding of

² I feel a need here to bring up Homi Bhabha’s book *The Location of Culture* as an aid to understanding my use of the word *culture*. Bhabha’s book (particularly the title essay) gives an argument that the real “culture” of a society is found not in the established and the traditional, but at the borders of such, where the established and traditional, where cultural identity is in engagement and negotiation with the traditions, values, and identities of other cultures. That is, Bhabha is arguing that we should see culture where it is *most* desedimented, most in flux, most in change (which is to say most *aesthetic*) rather than where it is most concrete and stable. Now, while I wholly agree with him in his placing of what is, in honesty, the true site of growth, development, and value in a society – the only site for liberatory belief, philosophy, action, identity –, I prefer to use the word *culture* to stand for the concretized, the stable, the traditional, since that is what most people, in every day language, would identify as culture. As such, my use of the word will almost always not be a positive. Where it is, context will make it clear.

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effort (and thus inherently critical of that great mass of work that does not display such effort), it will be the most aesthetic, the most created, the most creative and thus the most difficult to reify, and the most threatening to the stability and identity of the nomos. So, culture gives them labels like “Dead White Men” and bids them go away.³

This is the nature of the nomic. Most of those persons who are regarded today as leading voices in U.S. poetry hold that position of leadership not because of aesthetic achievement but because of the self-stabilizing workings of a nomos. Which is to say that the majority of those living poets held in esteem today are little more than the Lady Gagas, David Greys, and Tim McGraws of our literary time. They can be considered, for all intents and purposes, pop – I’ll get twittery and slap on the tag #poppoetry –, however their presence within culture. Pop music is the parallel example: the music industry has much at stake in keeping their listeners believing that Lady Gaga has meritable talent and cultural value; so also with of culture of poetry.

But, I want to risk repetition and emphasize: this is not and should not be a surprise to anybody. This is not accusation, this is description, not just of the culture of poetry, but of every established culture. The majority of popular poetry is always going to be pop poetry, just as the majority of novels that make the NYTimes list are really pop novels, just as the majority of music on the *Billboard* top 100 is pop music. This is the *default* situation. I am not here making an argument for something new; rather, I am deciding to talk about poetry just as though it were any other performance culture. Except, as I said, there is here so much more at stake with literature than with pop music, because of the relationship between language and the psyche and the individual’s

³ A category within which you neither have to be either dead, nor white, nor male.

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engagement and understanding of the world.⁴ In fact, considering what MFA-culture claims for their literature and poetry, you would think that the dominance of conventionality in poetry would be constant subject of critique and discourse. Rather, because of what is at stake on the other side – careers, reputations, and a growing MFA industry – the idea that poetry is going to be primarily pop poetry, even the poetry of the leading poets of our time, by necessity must be what is *refused* from being talked about, what cannot be talked about, and what is not wanted to be talked about.

And yet, it is so very important a thing.

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This essay is about the replies made by a poet, also a professor at a university, to a blog post about one of his poems. The reason for this essay is that the replies were of such a nature that they perform wonderfully characteristically the *nomos* of pop poetry. For that, what I see in them is an opportunity for demonstration. It is my contention that, even for those elements that make it individual (which will always be present to some degree), the overall performance is demonstrative of the deeply *nomic* nature and system – and *voice* – of the culture of poetry in the U.S.

Now, most essays of this nature will be met with demands for and expectations of proof – which I will not provide. Nor will I attempt to argue out of example (beyond the poem and the replies), for such is *always* a path to failure with topics like this one: it is offering specific cases as evidence for broad, cultural energies, which is fallacious. Just as the single event tells us nothing about statistics, the single poem (or, even, poet) tells us nothing about the

⁴ Which is in no way to say music – or by extension the arts – are not of supreme importance.

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contemporary state of the culture of poetry.⁵ In truth, the use of specific example within discussions such as this – which is to say discussions such as this *in print*, where there can be no active, in-the-moment exchange, negotiation, and correction of ideas – will only serve to open the door for misunderstanding and straw man arguments (intentional or not). (Indeed, and ironically, the strength of the Edmundson essay would have increased greatly if he had avoided arguing from example. Though, that might not have been apparent to all.)

This is especially true when what you are trying to demonstrate is ubiquitous, or an obviousness, or in some other way the norm, for the aim with such efforts is not to get the reader/listener to see the part but to see the whole. For example, in teaching the difference between nomic and aesthetic language, in wanting to show that the majority of speech by the majority of people is nomic in modality (and a great part of that phatic), the single instance is remarkably ineffective. Better is to send the students out with an idea of what to listen for, to tell them, the next time they are in the local, popular watering hole or some such type of social environment to listen to the conversations going on around them, especially when new people enter the conversation, and see how it is mostly the same things being said, over and over, from conversation to conversation; and within the conversations; and see also just how much of it serves a purpose that is not informational, but phatic. That is, the best way to show the norm is to set up a participatory demonstration.

Yes, some of the students won't ever bother, or won't remember, and some of the students won't see it. But those who do stop and look usually come back with an understanding of the event

⁵ Which also means the single event can speak nothing in refutation. Which is the same thing as saying trotting out examples from the 1% does not refute the existence – or the anchoring of culture of poetry within – the other 99%.

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far greater than could ever be offered by example in the classroom. (In added benefit, that seeing it is remarkably contagious from that point on.)

That is my primary aim and intent here. As is the general intent and practice of my Poetry Daily Critique blog, I have no intention of offering proof *per se* to any end. I am offering discussion, *discourse* – and the aesthetic can only be spoken through active, creative discourse – with the hopes that the ideas being discussed can be taken away, observed, and explored. Here, in that I want to discuss the culture of poetry and that culture’s performance, I would hope the reader can engage the ideas presented not as fact, assertion, or proof, but as discourse and exploration; as ideas with which they might observe the world of poetry, the *culture* of poetry in the U.S., so as to both see how and even whether those ideas play out, and what it means for poetry: that is, what it means not only for the culture of poetry in the U.S., but also what it means for poetry itself, and most especially for the reader in their own writing and reading of poetry and literature (and, even, for their support – including monetary – of poetry and literature and the arts).

Granted, I am using but one instance as my source text: which makes for poor proof generally. And, normally, it is inevitable and unavoidable that any argument will be weakened by arguing out of a single case: thus the requirement for replicability in the hard sciences. Except that this isn’t an argument to a conclusion. This is only observation; but an observation that can *then* be duplicated, through further observation within the world – which is also parallel to the hard sciences, in that the single demonstration does not truly offer proof *until* it has been replicated. And so the value of this one instance of performance: it *so aptly* and overtly demonstrates what would be expected to occur within a culture of poetry that was governed by a societal *nomos* rather than a will to promote individual creativity.

Now, it might be argued that what appears in the replies were far more crafted by the defense of ego than by the defense of a

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cultural nomos. Except that the ego must always have some investment in its nomoi; and the degree of that investment will usually be proportional to the emotionality and energy put into the defense of those nomoi. A nomos, after all, offers the person *identity* within and through the culture. If a poet's identity as a poet is dependent upon the definition of poet as established by, maintained by, and given importance to by a nomos of which that person is a part, then it is no small thing to question the poet's judgment and authority (or, the merits of their poem) as it is defined by that culture. For you are questioning the very identity of the poet, the station of the poet – even, the definition of *poet*. The energies of defense, then, will come out of both emotion *and* the defense of and assertion of the nomos: the former being greatly fed by the latter. Though, I do not rest the strength of this presentation on that psychological expectation, but on that this performance so greatly follows what would be expected in a vociferous, nomic defense. (For example, it is the same as that which you would see in defense of the nomos of an established religion by a person psychologically invested in that religion.) Similarly, what conclusions as to the culture of poetry might be drawn from the demonstration bear only in minimum upon on the specific case; the greater weight bears upon the greater culture of poetry: which is, that the culture of poetry in the U.S. is *exactly* what would be expected in a firmly established nomos of pop poetry.

The proof does not, and can not lie here. It lies in that what was performed in the replies can be seen being continuously performed throughout the culture of poetry - though, usually, not so obviously. I am not presenting an exceptional or peculiar or heretofore unobserved case. I am offering observation (on my part, demonstration on the poet's part) of the absolutely expected case: that the culture of poetry in the U.S. is in fact a firmly established, sedimentary nomos, and that that culture will be performed exactly as a nomic culture would be expected to be performed. Nor is this demonstration anything new as regards the arts. In fact, that is very

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much what Fussell is saying (though obversely) in the excerpt above. It has been said many times over through the history of literature and the arts – Wordsworth was so arguing against the pop-poetry of his time in his Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*; Hawthorne’s distress that his books would not ever sell as well as the genre romance of his time is a like complaint; Manet’s statement before his painting of *Olympia*, “It seems that I must paint a nude” is directly comment on the difference of modalities between the nomic and the aesthetic.⁶ Now we have decades of theoretical exploration – if not a more than a century if we go back to Nietzsche and Freud, or centuries if we go back to the Romantics – of language and of the aesthetic and of nomic culture, of the human mind and person. We have in the arts developed from Romanticism through Impressionism and Symbolism to Modernism; we have in theory and criticism passed through structuralism and into post-structuralism (mis-named in that the former is really pre-cursor to the latter). We have Nietzsche; we have Lévi-Strauss, Cassirer, Eliade, and Campbell; we have Freud and Lacan and Jung; we have Worringer and Bataille; we have Derrida, Barthes, Kristeva, and Deleuze, and launching the post-structural directly into assault on the cultural, we have Butler, Bhabha, Wittig, Irigaray, and Sedgwick; and, on a wholly different tack, we have Berlin.⁷ We understand now what convention, ideology and culture is, and we have delved into and explored and given voice to its counter: free play, the individual, and the aesthetic. Indeed, there is no excuse, any more, in academia, for not understanding the nature of the nomic and the aesthetic.

For all that, the burden of proof with this essay lies on the other

⁶ Ross King, *The Judgment of Paris*, 22-23, quoting Antonin Proust, *Édouard Manet: souvenirs* (Paris: H. Laurens, 1913), 43.

⁷ That is a wholly off-the-cuff list. Read nothing into the decisions of who is present and who is not.

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side of the argument: with those that might argue that the culture of contemporary poetry is *not* governed by the nomic nature of cultures.

Which would be an extraordinary proof, indeed.

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A couple of notes before I continue into the body proper.

1. The entirety of this demonstration hinges on the acceptance that what was happening within the replies was not merely emotional rant – and I believe there is sufficient evidence to that one point – but the performance of something greater: the defense not just of ego but of a belief system and its governing nomos. Unless you can make this first supposition, the rest of this essay will be pointless, and you can stop here. And it will be a supposition, a cultural thought experiment, because the “proof,” as it were, of the supposition will not – and *can not* – be provided within this essay. It will come in observation of the culture of poetry, and whether that culture does indeed perform equally (if not so vociferously) the nomos supposed here. For a nomos can only be witnessed through the constant *re*-appearance of its performances. That is the nature of the nomos: it exists, externally, within that constant being-performed. Though, what I can contribute, is that I see this very thing play out continually, and in all the old expected places.⁸

2. The ideas underlying this essay are neither new, overly idiosyncratic, nor secreted in their origins. So, for reasons of style, I will mostly avoid critical or theoretical reference or quotation, with infrequent exception. For example: I will speak Jacques Derrida’s name, though primarily I speak that wonderful word of

⁸ Thus much of the rhetoric of my blog project: proof is pointless if the readers can not first *see the language of poetry* that is hiding behind the conventionality of poetry. Indeed, *proof*, per se, is non-existent. In the end, there is only *seeing*: which is possible only when the individual reads their world as an individual, and not as a cultural creature.

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his, *desedimentation*: a word whose use I enjoy because it is itself so demonstrative.⁹ Though, it cannot be denied that some works are here more dominantly present than others. And, for that, if I were to chose some theory-oriented titles to name – books to offer in the nature of a PBS “for further reading” – they would be *Criticism and Truth* (1966) by Roland Barthes, *Gender Trouble* (1990) by Judith Butler, and *The Sacred Canopy* (1969) by Peter L. Berger. Three books that approach the same topic from out of three fields (literature, society, religion). Some of the language below is theirs. Some of the language is primarily of my own enunciation: *sophistication* and *validity*, for example, words whose purpose are to bring theory into the domain of the writing side of literature. Using the word *nomie* (and *nomos*) to speak of the modality of the social side of our being is very old; however, using the words *the aesthetic* (as opposed to *aesthetics*) and *cosmic* (and *cosmos* – words I use elsewhere) for the modality of the individual side of our being is mostly my own.¹⁰

3. Because of the nature of this essay, in that it is an engagement with a person’s responses to a post upon my blog, anonymity is essentially impossible, unless I were to go back and delete the original responses. But that seems rather pointless to me, and exactly counter to both the project of which the blog is a part and my own philosophies on discourse: especially written discourse, where you have opportunity to think it out and correct. Simply: if you’re going to say something, then put your name to it.

Which leads to the post itself, which, I will admit, is not my best writing. (And isn’t that always the case.) Normally, I do go back and edit my own posts, primarily for the sake of clarity. If I ever

⁹ And, also, so inherently accusatory.

¹⁰ In truth, Nietzsche might not have used the term *the aesthetic* quite as I do, but he all but did. And in that Derrida, like Nietzsche, states that everything they wrote was, in the end, about the aesthetic, the same can be said for him. So my use is not ungrounded.

substantially change the ideas in any moment of a post I let it be known that such a change happened. (Personally, I would hate to see a post and read one thing, only to come back a week later and read something else. That doesn't generate much trust on the part of the reader.) And, if ever I am correcting something that was accidentally derogative of another individual, I make that known as well. In turn, if the poet here had requested editing of his own replies, I would have gladly permitted it – within those guidelines. To be honest, I can respect that he did not. Because of the nature of the exchange in the Replies prompted by the blog, however, I have changed almost nothing in the original text of the post.

Since the original post, the poet's replies, and my responses are the source of this essay, I have made new files of them to make them more accessible and readable than as they are in the stream of the original exchange. One can also go back to the original post and see the replies and responses there. The new files are explained and presented just below.

II. EMOTIONALITY, AUTHORITY, AND MORALITY

The post that began all this was posted on May 18, 2013, on my Poetry Daily Critique blog. The post was an exploratory look at structure and ideation using the poem “Spook House” by Benjamin Myers as subject matter. “Spook House” had appeared on the Verse Daily site three days prior. Myers is a professor of literature at Oklahoma Baptist University. Outside his academic work, he has published two volumes of poetry, one of which won the Oklahoma Book Award for Poetry. I assume he also teaches creative writing. (To my knowledge I had never before heard of Benjamin Myers or read any of his poetry.¹¹)

Myers's first reply to my post came a month later, on June 25,

¹¹ Which I say only because I believe in maintaining transparency. Outside of that, it means nothing that I had never heard of Myers previously.

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and the exchange between us lasted but a couple of days. There was an audience to the exchange (which I know both by the blog’s statistics and Myers’s own comments); I think it is safe to assume that that audience consisted primarily of students. Which is important, as it establishes that Myers was performing for an audience not in the sense of an entertainer but in the sense of a person publically defending their work and station. It also gives no small energy to the idea that Myers was performing a nomos.

For pragmatic reasons, from this point on I will adapt the convention that Myers’s replies will always be called “Replies,” while my entries into the discussion (outside the original post) will always be called “Responses.” If I re-connect long entries broken up into parts and ignore entries that are merely corrections of previous entries, the exchange can be condensed to the following Replies and Responses:

- Post (5/15)
- Reply 1 (6/25 11:14am)
 - Response 1 (6/25 2:21pm)
- Reply 2 (6/26 8:00am)
 - Response 2 (6/26 11:05am)
- Reply 3 (6/26 11:56am)
- Reply 4 (6/26 1:07 pm)
 - Response 3 (6/27 11:29pm)
- Reply 5 (6/28 4:09 am)

(Times given are that of my time zone, on the east coast.) It is by these labels that I will identify the comments made.

To aid the reader, I have made a couple new files: a file of the exchange as just condensed and outlined; a file that is solely Myers’s replies, color-coded to show the different purposes of the language within the replies; and a reformatting of the poem “Spook House” into paragraph form. Those links are just below (and on the left side of this essay as it appears on my website). I also include direct links to the original Verse Daily page and to the original posting on the Poetry Daily Critique blog. Here are the links:

- [the poem](#), on Verse Daily
- [the poem](#) in paragraph form

- [the original post](#)
- [the full exchange](#) of replies
- [Myers’s replies](#) alone and color-coded

As said prior, I do admit the original post is not the strongest writing: there are a couple straight out errors in wording and syntax, and some moments where it is not the clearest what I am saying. In partial defense, my want for the tone of the blog is for it to be conversational, rather than academic (or otherwise formal), so I don’t always strive for precision in language. Also, there is the pragmatic factor of time: this is a side project of mine, and I spend enough time on the posts as it is without adding meticulous editing.

The function and purpose of my blog is to use the poems on the Poetry Daily and Verse Daily sites as source material for discussion about writing poetry and about poetics and the aesthetic. Its text is aimed wholly at looking at poetry from the writer’s standpoint: it is not meant to be a critique of poems or poets in the quotidian meaning of that word. I try to maintain a rhetorical stance of simply talking about the poems – though one injected with information out of poetics and literary theory. The rhetoric is intended to prompt discussion and examination of ideas generated out of the poems examined: not to “provide” knowledge, as it were, but to get readers to *think about* ideas concerning poetry as an aesthetic object.¹² Unlike a text book, it does not operate through definition and example; unlike a critique, it does not mean to operate through formal analysis and explication (though at times it does approach that). It is an attempt to present concepts and ideas in a way that offers readers a chance to probe, test, develop, and refine those

¹² I speak of a poem or text being “aesthetic” or “nomic” as does all theorists concerned with such: in their own terms. But must always be recognized that every text (and reading) is nomic to some degree, or there would be an absence of any sense or coherence; and every text (and reading) is aesthetic to some degree, or our language would have the rigorous formality of a programming language. With the labels “aesthetic” and “nomic” I speak of a text, utterance, or reading or writing where one modality greatly predominates.

concepts from a the standpoint of their own poetic creation. As such, the blog rarely runs to argument and proof (something which becomes important in the replies). Rather, as I say in my Response 1:

My purpose here is to look at poems and talk about them in a way that will prompt people to think about poetry and poetics in more than a surface-limited manner. As such, I exaggerate, over-state, give twists, ask questions that point one way even though I think the answer lies in another direction, and [. . .] write things even while thinking to myself "I really want to like these lines . . . someone show me I am wrong."

So my rhetoric is quite frequently guided by my discursive ends rather than by strictures of logic. I make it no secret that my project does have an “agenda”: a philosophical background that extends far beyond a mere appreciation of poetry: that is, the idea of literature as a pursuit of beauty, and the exploration of the aesthetic as the modality of beauty. This is rather blatantly stated on the top of the blog’s site. Also, I do not at all make it a secret that I find most contemporary poetry (as published both in books and in journals) to be often remarkably shallow, not infrequently inept, and for the most part repetitive, undifferentiated, and banal.

But, then, that is rather the premise of this essay: that most poetry written today is going to be shallow, generally inept, repetitive, and banal, and that the nomos of pop poetry will nonetheless uphold it as quite the opposite. As such, I am inevitably – and intentionally – going to be poking at sacred cows. As I say in my 3d response:

I know exactly what I am doing here: I am standing in the street, calling out the Emperor on his new clothes.

Though, I try to keep those energies as background energies. (They do occasionally erupt forward.) The primary efforts and energies are toward that exploration, examination, questioning, and thought-prompting. As for “Spook House,” I rather thought myself

standing mostly in the foreground (if occasionally inartfully). Though, some level of critique is inevitable, and it is plain by the post that I don't find the poem terribly successful.

Except, is it not? After all, it performs exactly as it was *meant* to perform.

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The header for this particular post was “ideation, depth, and bombs.” My intent was to use the presence in the poem of what I call an “emotion bomb” to open the door to an expeditionary look at depth and ideation.

What is an “emotion bomb”? On the blog, I have used the phrase a small number of times to label an event often seen in mediocre (and rarely seen in more sophisticated) poetry. The phrase describes an insertion into the poem of a sudden and strong emotional effect. I call them “bombs” because, usually, they carry little ideational depth within the rest of poem and tend to appear out of nowhere. They mostly exist as cheap effect, as a way to introduce into the poem profundity or emotional poignancy or whatnot without the poem (or the poet) having to expend energy building up such ideas. In comparison, it is choosing the fright of the monster jumping out of the closet rather than the development of the more resonant – and more difficult to accomplish – ideations of horror. In contemporary poetry, it is usually worked through an interruptive phrase like “but she is dead now,” or, in poetry that strives for political poignancy, a similar moment that establishes that the person died needlessly in some Arabic conflict. Same event, only a different flavor of bomb.

So, I wanted to look at “Spook House” as a poem with a emotion bomb in it, though a poem that in a slanted way *does* engage the idea contained within the bomb. I question in the post whether that engagement saves the bomb or, rather, exposes the whole of the poem as being ideationally shallow and disorganized. In his Replies, Myers objects to both my reading of the poem, and those ideas of structure and unity that underlie that reading. His Reply 1 is a rather brief – if harsh – statement to that end.

My Response 1 was intended as a polite acknowledgment of the first Reply, offered without inviting continuing the discussion. This might be more apparent to people who are familiar with blogs and such internet texts open to replies, as reading Reply 1 in isolation it reads like little more than an emotion-laced, insult-filled ego response.¹³ So, in my Response I accepted the accusation that one moment in the post could be read as an *ad hominem* (as Myers so did read it), clarifying that my intent was not to say that the poem demonstrated that its author had no familiarity with Dante, but that the poem *spoke* no such familiarity. I acknowledged the reference to Randall Jarrell, declined the opportunity to discuss postmodern poetics, and left it at that.

Myers opens Reply 2 with:

I think my response may have been too subtle for
you [. . .].

In Myers's eyes my Response was wholly insufficient: it did not perform as Myers intended or wanted for it to perform. Which is to say *I* did not perform as Myers intended or wanted it me perform. There was an expectation on Myers's part: an expectation that I would see his Reply 1 in a certain light, as a certain statement, and respond *accordingly*. Reply 2 speaks that Reply 1 was not merely a brief tirade of insult: there was a point, *a statement* being made, and I failed wholly to see it.

After the second Reply, it is not difficult to re-read Reply 1 as intending such a statement. After all, the opening paragraph is about poetics, including not only an appeal to the authority of postmodern poetics¹⁴ but also a slant against those poetics

¹³ People familiar with blogs and might also recognize that replies of that nature (i.e., ego-responses) are occasionally expected, especially with a blog like my own. So it is not unsurprising that I read it that way.

¹⁴ I should make note that the phrase “postmodern poetics” can here only refer to those ideas that Myers himself holds to be postmodern poetics. But, in that Myers is speaking out of a normalizing *nomos*, those ideas will not vary very far from what is culturally held to be postmodern poetics, and

represented by *The Well Wrought Urn*, poetics which Myers qualifies as “quaint” – no small word in that it nigh trivializes Brooks and that entire era of literary theory and criticism, thus giving strength to my first reading that Reply 1 was primarily ego-response and the use of such as “post-modern criticism” and Randall Jarell served only to ground that barrage in an academic/knowledged frame: after all, you cannot insult a person’s heritage without actually speaking of that person’s heritage.

Reply 2 recasts the whole of Reply 1: there was purpose, there was argument, there was organized intent. It was not mere emotional outburst – so also, despite the continuing tone of insult, are the rest of the Replies. But then, the insults are themselves part of the argument, not the other way around. Indeed, the insults speak two concerted efforts of characterization: one of “a fool masquerading as an expert” and one of a “bitter and vindictive” person suffering from a “case of sour grapes.” (That is, a person who cannot get published on their own, so instead takes out their bitterness on others via the open mic of a website).¹⁵ Both are important, and both go to the same end: to *define* the writer of the post as someone who “clearly do[es] not know anything about” poetry: tantamount to saying someone who is *not of the culture of poetry*. Thus, the Replies are not at all an attack upon my heritage, or hairstyle, or habits – in the manner of a normal, emotion-driven assault – but a direct attack upon my self *as an authority* as regards poetry: specifically, within the nomos of the culture of poetry.

Arguably, authority is the primary point of contest throughout the Replies. Though, it is not a contest of *which* authority but a

will fit well enough within the norm so as to validate both Myers’s appeal to postmodern poetics and my use of the term to categorize those ideas.

¹⁵ To note, the barrage of insults can be somewhat easily (if not perfectly) divided into three types: general insults, insults attacking my knowledge and acumen with literature, and insults concerning the motivations behind this blog. I color code the phrasing (see [file](#)) to show what effort was put into each. The far majority lies within the specific rather than the general.

contesting of whether I possess authority at all. For, from the nomic view, I am – in the Post but also in the Responses – not engaged in an acceptable act of debate over poetic points of fact, a debate over something that established authority can readily characterize and qualify. And, in that my rhetoric strives for an aesthetic discourse, I am in deed not: something which strikes Myers truly and right off:

But, I see you have determined to focus on
“discussion, not argument and proof.” I congratulate
you on sticking so closely to your critical principles of
groundless assertion and the avoidance of reason.

If I were merely calling into question points of fact, the contest would be a test of authorities. However, in word and rhetoric, the post is calling into question the very system of belief that establishes those points of fact *as fact*. That is, I am not merely calling into question the quality of “Spook House,” I am also calling into the question the very system that attributes quality *to* “Spook House.” I am reading – and inviting readers – to read poetry not as they are culturally expected to read poetry (just as I did not respond to Myers’s original reply in form with cultural expectations). I am moving the entire field of discourse from “if you do X then you are writing good poetry” (a wholly nomic methodology) to asking the more fundamental questions:

- What is sophistication as comes to writing poetry?
- To what degree (and where) does the poem here examined demonstrate sophistication (or the absence thereof)?

In that sophistication is individual, they are questions that do not sit well in a “there is a correct answer” modality: if “what is sophistication?” (and “how is this sophisticated or unsophisticated?”) can only be answered by an individual in accordance to that own individual’s sophistication, I am not merely questioning an authority, I am questioning the very authoritativeness of authority. It is the crime of daring to question the emperor’s new clothes: something which will usually piss the emperor off; and, not only the emperor but all their faithful subjects. Why? Because it is not simply asking a question: it is *calling into question the very idea of truth*. Thus,

the common response to such a question:

“You are not wearing any clothes!”

“*What do you mean?* Of course I am!”

“*What do you mean?*” – that is, “how do those words that you have spoken at all make sense?” The response marks the question as an absurdity, because *everybody knows* the emperor has clothes. It is an established truth. Those authorities that delineate the true have put their stamp of approval upon it. The question is not one of character: e.g., “what kind of clothes are those?” It is a question of reality. As such, there response can only refuse engagement of the question and dismiss the very questioning. To engage the question as legitimate is impossible: if the question had authoritative legitimacy then accepted reality is not real; truth is wholly overturned.

“What do you mean?” if asked honestly, is an aesthetic question: a question that recognizes a disjunction in that moment of communication, a recognition that there is a confusion within truth itself, and that offers the willing flexibility needed to mediate that disjunction to the satisfaction of both sides – which is to say wherein both sides remain equal participants in the discourse. Within the modality of the nomos, however, the question “what do you mean?” can only be used accusingly: that is, “you are talking nonsense.”

This opens the door for what is the very nomic continuation: “since what you are saying is nonsense, then you must be nonsensical; and in that you are nonsensical, your participation in this discourse – within this culture – can be wholly ignored. If you wish to continue this discussion, you must first see that what I say is accepted meaning, is truth, and follow it. You must accept your position within the nomos, and act accordingly” This explains Myers’s statements such as in Reply 3:

But someone really has to call you out on this b.s.

Who knows, I might be saving you from stepping
into an even worse mess in the future.

The Replies are not only an appeal to authority (a reaffirmation of authority and of the standing of both Myers and “Spook House” in relation to that authority), but the attempt to remove authority from

my post, words, and person: not through proof, but through performance. It is, in a not at all metaphorical fashion, an attempt to “put someone in their place”: an attempt to identify a person as stepping out of bounds (an act normally coupled with the assertion of the authority to declare the person as being out of bounds).¹⁶ Thus the amount of presupposition within the Replies: this is not a matter of proof; it is not even within the realm where proof is required or argument applied; this is the domain of performance and re-assertion. Thus also the amount of emotionality in the replies. On the one side, truth, authority, validity within the culture of poetry – the culture that gives “Spook House” and its poet certain qualities and merit – is being wholly challenged; on the other side, the refutation of that challenge lies in performance: the “putting” in the idea of “putting into one’s place” is the key term, for those “places” – social positioning, authority, stature, merit – only exist when the various “ones” of culture – the poets, the poems, the poetics and theory – are *put* therein. A *relationship* of authority is being established and affirmed (just as with and in parallel to that established between postmodern poetics and the poetics of *The Well Wrought Urn*), and such a relationship – a *social* relationship – demands performance.

As I said above, the underlying issue in the Replies is that I did not speak about “Spook House” – speak about poetry – within the established proprieties of the nomos of pop poetry. Rather, I questioned the not only the truths of the nomos, and the authorities

¹⁶ A point of clarification: there are, in fact, two types of stepping out of bounds. There is that of stepping out of one’s established position and into another established position within which one doesn’t belong, and there is that of stepping wholly out of the establishment itself. Both are affronts to the ordering (and truths) of society and the nomos. The difference is the former is calling into question which identity the offender is supposed to carry. The offender still accepts and functions within the general nomos. The latter is calling into question the very system by which identity is created and assigned. The intentions and rhetoric of my blog are of the latter nature: it is the offense of the aesthetic against the nomic.

that legitimate those truths, I questioned Truth and its ability to be Truth: I stood *outside* established authority. It should be stated here that it is part of the rhetoric and very much conscious decision on my part to try to keep appeals to authority in the blog itself – especially any that might establish myself as such – to a minimum. I do not want readers reading the posts as though spoken from a position of authority, posts whose veracity and strength would then lie in that they are argued out of some recognizable, academic source or well-known name. The idea, after all, is to prompt independent thought on the part of readers/writers, to get them to think about *questions* rather than *facts*.

Indeed, much of the source of the vitriol of the Replies lies not in what I wrote at any point, but in that there was no “argument and proof,” that there was no appeal to authority. Which is one way that makes the Replies so demonstrative of a nomic defense. If I had instead written a short thesis, laced through and through with logical progressions, rationally ordered demonstrations of proof, and a sufficient display of accepted symbols of authority, I believe the Replies would have been far more wholly about and stemming from a bruised ego, as the nomic need for authority would have been satisfied, if not necessarily to Myers’s favor. The appeal to authority as a nomic performance gives statements the appearance of and, more importantly, the *modality of* truth. If I had written so, Myers’s argument with myself would then have simply been one about the veracity of whatever claims were made. But without such, in a rhetoric of discussion rather than proof, in an atmosphere where authority is avoided, no such nomic debate can be established:¹⁷ ergo Myers’s description of the “critical principles of

¹⁷ Unless, of course, I were to drop down into that modality in my Responses and argue Myers’s Replies on *his* (i.e., the *nomos*’s) terms. With any such, though, there is immediately and only affirmation of the *nomos*, and complete abandonment of the aesthetic. As demonstrated by the charges of “it’s not philosophy” leveled against both Nietzsche and Derrida, the aesthetic can not be argued and proved; it can only be talked about. I am sure readers of the blog assume I am speaking as a fellow explorer in

groundless assertion and the avoidance of reason.” Thus the necessity and performative effectiveness (within the nomos) of the act of “putting into one’s place”: the offending speaker is given a social identity within the nomos, one that removes any authority from their words. Even though I never engaged the Replies within the modality of the nomic, Myers is yet establishing, for those members of the culture of contemporary poetry who are watching (in this case primarily up-and-coming members of that culture), the “places” – the identities – of my own and Myers’s voices.

Thus, the Replies have a two-fold nature: they must both establish the identity and constitution of the offending speaker as perceived from *within* the culture’s nomos,

[from Reply 1:] Jarrell knew how to make stinging criticism grounded in something more than arbitrary, nonsensical vagaries about “structure.” He also knew the difference between a sharp critic and just being a jerk. Of course, he also knew how to write poetry himself, something you clearly do not know anything about.¹⁸

and they must re-affirm the authorities through which the “natural order of things” as defined within the nomos is maintained. Again,

You might not find postmodern poetics compelling, but some familiarity with it would perhaps at least save you from looking like an ass.

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the writing of poetry; however, I never use I my own work as example or exemplar.

¹⁸ It is to note that I make no claims as to writing poetry in the original post. Indeed, outside of moments that speak about the general idea of the writing of poetry, I had always avoided any specificity as regards “my writing.” The direct reference to my writing in Response 3 is the first ever within the context of the blog. (At least, of which I have any memory. Though, I know it is the first time I spoke of any actual text.)

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Authority gives grounding of verity to the truths asserted within the nomos; but in that a nomos is itself but a complex of conventionality, those authorities exist as sources of truth only inasmuch as the members of the culture accept their status as authorities. The flow is circular: the authorities establish the truth value of the beliefs of the nomos, and the nomos legitimizes – through its continual performance – the righteousness of those authorities. In the end, within a nomic culture, authority is a *position* within the social, a position whose function is to maintain the status quo, the belief structure, the world-view of the nomos, and a position which is maintained only insofar as those people within that nomos can accept the authority of those persons (or texts, or whatever) holding those positions, and thus the modality of truth, and the nature of the nomos.

Which is to say, the culture of poetry, ultimately, will chose authorities which can most successfully maintain the culture of poetry. The culture of pop music cycles through its icons, establishing them as cultural identities, as speakers of the “art of music,” giving them the legitimacy of “well, they made it to the top, therefor they must be good,” which in turn creates the cultural response of “they are at the top; they are good; therefore I will listen to them, buy their albums, and participate in the fan base that will maintain their status at the top” – and then back around the circle again. All of which, in the end, maintains the status quo and on-going stability of the culture of pop music. Which leads us in turn back to our basic question: by what possible logic, argument, character, or trait should we expect the culture of poetry to be any different?

But also back to the moment of this one example, where that nomic cycle of acceptance and affirmation through performance is being challenged by a voice that is (1) without expressed, recognized authority; (2) not playing within the rules of authority, assertion, and proof; and (3) asking their readers to follow likewise” such a voice could not be accepted as having authority, for such recognition would immediately legitimate the acts of that person, and ascribe the modality of verity to their words. Rather, the

blasphemer – and I choose that word descriptively – must be cast out. Or, in the case of the condemning priest in their moment of beneficence –

Perhaps you should consider how to put those assets to some positive use instead. Maybe, if you read and study, you could someday be a decent critic.

Repent, sinner, and come back into the fold: which is to say, to take one’s acceptable, accepted – *natural* – position within the structures of society, within the rightful ordering of the world, within the *nomos*. Within the culture of contemporary poetry, that means criticism that follows the right way of doing things, and thus that does not challenge the status quo. (At least, not in an unacceptable way.)

But, remember, this is also performance. There is an audience here, and, to continue the metaphor, that audience includes acolytes. The performance is thus trebly key. There is a world-view being asserted, a world-view being performed. It is not for naught, then, the second prong of the assault upon the heretic: the demonizing.

It first appears in substance in Reply 2 (forgive the lengthy extraction):

Honestly, it is this bit of snide comment that gives you away more than anything else in your post as merely sour. I can’t help but conjecture that you are one of the all too common species of failed poet who, after suffering a few rejections, found it easier to blame the supposedly lapsed standards of contemporary literature – which will obviously never understand your great genius – than to buckle down, pay your dues, and work on your art. In short, your tone makes it clear that you are just another case of sour grapes: knowing you will never appear on either Poetry Daily or Verse Daily, you take it upon yourself to sit in your dark cave and mutter about those who do.

What is being referred to by “this bit of snide comment” is a parenthetical sentence in the original post, situated under the first

two lines of the poem, which I normally put at the top of each post for identification purposes. Visually, it is quite clear the top of every post is wholly informational. I’ll give you here all three lines as it appears on the post. To distinguish the poem, I will put it in a different font:

The first. I heard of Dante
was at the county fair when I was ten,
(Obviously, Verse Daily has shown us again their
love for laxity.)

(you can also look back at the [page](#) itself.) As stated in my Response 2, the sentence refers to the period in the first line of the poem. Verse Daily has a terrible habit of botching the transcription of the poems they put on their site. Typos frequently appear. (I have a number of times pointed this out on the blog.¹⁹) This error is beyond blatant. So obvious, indeed, I question how Myers himself missed it on the blog page.

Yet, Myers tees off on it. As for myself (indeed, it is rather what I would expect with most people), if I were a reader of the blog, I am sure I would have noticed the glaringly incorrect period – especially in that it would be appearing in the first line of *my own* poem – and would have been able to guess at the context of the “laxity” line. And even if I missed the period, the positional and visual context (under the first two lines of the poem, in the informational part of the post) would have still given strong hint that the sentence was about something having to do specifically with those first two lines, which would again have pointed me toward that interruptive period. Indeed, even if I missed the period, and even if the sentence was, for me, “meaningless and vague,” I still honestly believe my response to it would be, simply, “I don’t understand that comment.” I honestly can not fathom how that sentence, positioned where it is, would ever lead me to type:

*You really should be ashamed of yourself for this snide and
meaninglessly vague comment. Do you mean to say that
the lines are lax in meter? In diction? In image?*

¹⁹ In fact, the error in “Spook House” has still not been corrected.

There is no such thing as “laxity” without some field
in which to be lax, some measure of strenuousness.

(Reply 2, emphasis mine)

(This reply is a day later, not in the heat of the moment.)

In the Reply it is used as a launching point for a wholly nomic assault: an opportunity is taken not to attack the writing, but to attack the writer. It is one that is framed not only within the competence/authority argument but also within a *moral* framework. Again: “*You really should be ashamed of yourself.*”

Even sitting here, typing and editing this essay, my thoughts are continually, *what a strange thing to say*. And what is the explanation that follows? That the statement is “meaninglessly vague,” intellectually “lax” on its own part, which sets it within the number of assertions of incompetence that function in conjunction with the act of social positioning described above. But there is still that opening line, a line that is for me terrifically unexpected, and would be whether it were to occur within an emotional rant or a rational reprove. The critique has been moved from a critique of ability to a *moral* judgment. (This is not the only such moment in the Replies.)

But should this be so unexpected? Yes, the emotionality. But emotionality does not explain expressing a moral affront. Yet, the influence of the nomic modality of the psyche does. For the *nomos* is the locus of truth, it is the world-view. It is that which is reality. It is also the ultimate truths out of which that reality is defined. As such, to challenge a nomic world-view is to assault a society or believing individual on teleological – which is essentially to say *religious* – grounds. A challenge to the *nomos* itself – which is to say any aesthetic challenge – will then of course have the potential to strike also as a moral affront and thus be naturally rebuked as an immoral act. (Just as an individual in a social framework such as described in *Downton Abbey*, should they step out of their social bounds, will be committing a social error, yes; but also an error with *moral* resonances. It is not just a faux pas, it is a *sin*. It is an affront to the *natural order* of things.)

But when you stop and look, morality is not infrequently the root and nature of argument in discourse about poetry. In no small

part, this finds hold in that appeal inherent to poetry as a medium that expresses the higher nature of humankind. In no small part, mediocre poetry is often given value through tapping into that morally-oriented appeal. You will often see, in response to essays and editorials like the Edmundson essay, replies that are so anchored in ideas that really have nothing to do with poetry per se but simply reaffirm the positive moral and emotional aspects of participation within the culture of poetry. Blurbs on the covers of books of poetry very frequently praise the contents not on issues of aesthetics or poetics or poetic daring-do, but on their moral-spiritual sheen. And it need not be positively oriented. Take, for instance, the annual Vida pie fair: it would be difficult to find a greater effort to create utterly groundless conclusions out of a single statistic so devoid of context as to be essentially meaningless. Which has nothing to with the ultimate validity of the conclusions; but has everything to do with statistical verity and veracity being thrown out the window for what is, essentially, a moral appeal.²⁰ The same moral sentiment underlies the use of poetry as a social critique, and the justification of social criticism: criticism that is often as argumentatively as groundless as are the conclusions drawn from pies – and yet, on moral principles, praised.

But this is not particular to the culture of poetry. This is how every nomos functions. Truth and religiosity are bound together. So it should not be a surprise that there is a moral streak in the Replies. After all, they are emotionally bound. And while the emotionality obviously did not take control and turn the Replies into a raving, irrational rant, I would argue it opened the doors for things to be said that might otherwise have been edited by eraser or delete key, if not, before that, by the psyche. Emotion opens paths not only for irrational jibberish, but for what is *wanted* to be said, what is desired to be performed and thus *affirmed*. It grants

²⁰ An interesting element of this is the question: how many of these conclusions are coming from Vida? and how many originate rather in the voices of people whose social position dictates the continual performance of such conclusions? A question wholly in unison with this essay.

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permissiveness to acting on what I will talk about in the next section: the need to read shallowly, to need to misread, to read the passage in the desired direction toward the desired meaning rather than the direction the words actually speak: a thing we witness every day with politicians and, more often, their homilists – and very frequently see within the culture of poetry, where reading depth into shallow poems is a way of life. Such would explain the strength and length of the conclusion drawn from the “laxity” sentence above. It can also be seen in the “failed writer” prong of the Replies.

This particularly in Reply 5, where Myers responds to my (for the first time on my blog) speaking about my own writing. I start with my Response 3, which refers to the moments in Reply 2 that casts me in the role of frustrated writer wringing out their sour grapes:

I am not at all sure how you came to that conclusion -- except, perhaps, in that you might must. In truth, I'm not now nor really have ever been that interested in publication. Though, I do have my meager list of credits: one poem, one story, one academic essay, and one conference paper. But I kind of like the symmetry of that, and it satisfies me for now. Indeed, most of my friends and writing acquaintances would say (and have chided me) that if I am not published it is wholly because I do not try nearly hard enough. And we laugh.

I don't think I could be more clear (and the paragraph does continue) in stating that publishing really carries very little importance for me. I've enjoyed it when it happened; but it is not something I actively seek. Which is, actually, important, because once again I am not conforming to the expected role of writer/critic within the culture of poetry, whose world *requires* the want for publication. If you don't want publication, then you don't have to learn to write toward publication. And if you don't *have* to learn to write toward publication, the MFA industry rather loses its primary source of students.

In not putting the expected values and emphases on

publication, in not seeking publication in the expected (and appropriate) ways, I am failing yet again to perform and reaffirm the culture of poetry. In yet another way I am heretical to the culture; in yet another way I must be put in my place, the act of which is performed in Reply 5, where there is not only the reappearance of the original diagnosis of frustrated bitterness but also the simultaneous use of publications as a statement of status within the nomos and as affirmation of publications as a source of authority within the nomos.

You also might be interested to know that I am an actual critic, published by reputable journals not just my own blog, and I have written negative reviews. The difference is that my reviews were based on sound and reasonable standards, not just bitterness.

Note how that affirmation is coupled with the authority of (but not demonstration of) argument and proof. Then again, in the more directed moment:

Okay, so you admit that you have never published much of anything. You admit that you are merely a crank with a beef with contemporary poetry. Your only qualification is access to a computer.

The phrasing and tone of that first sentence makes it clear that the conveyed meaning is “you haven’t published, therefore” you are “merely a crank”; and, a crank without “qualification.” The text is toned down a bit from the accusations of failure-induced bitterness in Reply 3, but there is still the presence of “bitterness” in the first quotation, and the characterization of “crank” in the second, both of which fall in line with the initial, long characterization of “sour grapes.” Different in description, perhaps, but the same in intent: characterization, demonization, positioning outside the ordering of the nomos, and removal of authority and status. They are actions which are quite normal elements within the defense of a nomos, and expected ones. For, a heretic – to return to our previous metaphor – attacks the reality of the nomic world view: they attack the order of it, the righteousness of it, the definitions and structuring provided by it. As such, they remove themselves from

that ordering, from that sense of “this is the way it is supposed to be.” As such, it is quite a natural thing for the demonization of the opponent to be literally that: a teratological re-characterization of the heretic, as not of the natural order, as something outside the way things are supposed to be, and thus one becomes a cave-dwelling worm and bitter crank.

III THE POEM AND THE REPLIES: STRUCTURE AND IDEATION

Before continuing, I want to give a moment to the poem itself, to set up what follows. A little effort here might save much effort later.

I take “Spook House” to be fairly stereotypical, contemporary poem; it finds its identity quite comfortably among the greater mass of poetry seen today. Though, it is larger than your average fare (51 lines). It is written, as are most contemporary poems, as sentences broken up into lines. Even as prose the sentences are not terribly interesting: the only real wordplay in the poem occurs at the end of the first stanza, with the mirrors; there is no rhyme or metrical attention; aurally and semantically it is at best non-descript. In fact, when written out as prose (which can be seen [here](#)), issues readily appear, as with the opening lines:

The first I heard of Dante was at the county fair when I was
ten, *Dante's Inferno* slashed in red on a black [. . .]

The visual “slashed” clashes with the aural “heard,” and the use of the comma does not make for a smooth read. This is probably apparent to most attentive ears even when read as lines, but is more apparent when put as a sentence. The use of a comma is actually quite conventional: though, I would argue, it is a convention that has arisen out of poor writing, as a means and reason to escape the need for and use of colons and semi-colons (and, even, dashes), things which make writing (poetry and prose) a bit more difficult.

The line breaks offer little in reputation that they are mostly arbitrary, used mostly (but not entirely) to keep the lines to similar lengths: over all they show no consistent justification, and in conjunction with the ordinary sentence structure no real poem-wide evidence that lines were being crafted rather than line breaks applied. That is also quite generic within contemporary poetry. Except for the first stanza, every stanza is a single sentence and a mostly independent thought. The one variation from that is where the sentence of the second stanza begins in the last line of the first. Here also there seems no real justification for the premature appearance of the sentence, or valuable effect from it: the poem works better with the words being left in the second stanza. (Indeed, if I wanted to really parse it out, I think it would be not too difficult to show that the stanzas were written as sentences: that is, the breaks came with the periods, not vice versa.)

There are other moments of mild semantic sloppiness. For example, the two “buts” (line 35, “But there wasn’t,” and line 45, “But I’m thinking”) attempt to conjoin ideas that are not really in a “but” relationship. Also, there are points where the wording of sentences is questionable, as with the Ferris wheel stanza:

I wanted to go on the Ferris wheel for [. . .] how it
reminded me of a queen I saw in a movie once,
raising her head to meet the eye of the executioner.

The comma is problematic; the semantics are a bit wobbly. Also, ideationally, it presents a bizarre reason to “want[] to go on” the Ferris wheel. As a reason it turns the boy into a rather morbid, if not unconsciously suicidal individual: not the intent of the poem.

In sum, it is a poem whose poetics sit near the middle of the bell curve. Some people, for the loose wording, might argue it sits somewhat below average. I would argue that that degree of attention *is* the average. At least, that is the acceptable average and here I cannot help myself but go to Pound, whose condemnations of pop poetry are among the best written ever:

Don’t think any intelligent person is going to be
deceived when you try to shirk all the difficulties of
the unspeakably difficult art of good prose by

chopping your composition into line lengths.²¹

But then, as I am arguing here, and speak on the blog, that deception is the very purpose and nature of the culture of pop poetry.

If I may digress, I find it an odd (and yet not at all odd) thing that Pound is so absent, if not – as with Cleanth Brooks – actively avoided within contemporary poetry and professional creative writing circles. It is difficult to defeat the statement that Ezra Pound knew more, understood more, explored more, and demonstrated more about creating beautiful things out of words in English than any other person in the twentieth century. Pound is one of the cornerstones of twentieth-century poetry in English: even for the many places he falters. (In fact it is argument *for*, not against the above that he ultimately considered the *Cantos* a botched effort.) But then, there is little place in pop poetry or postmodern poetics for statements like the above, or like Imagism’s

2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.²²

which is bedrock to all writing of any sophistication. Such is the nature of the nomic, however: one must not permit authorities in contradiction to one’s own. So, rather than engage the ideas of Imagism, pop poetics dismisses them entirely, quietly sweeping it under the rug, using accusations of “dead white men” to justify the broom.

That is not a passing slight: that is yet again pointing out a predictable and commonplace act of a nomos of pop poetry. (Though, I admit, it does speak some bile.)

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I said at the end of the previous section: “where reading depth

²¹ “A Retrospect.” *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, 5. An essay that should be required reading and re-reading within poetry circles. That and “I gather the Limbs of Osiris” (in *Selected Prose 1909-1965*).

²² *Ibid.*

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into shallow poems is a way of life.” It is a statement far more literal than you might think, in that shallow reading is, within the contemporary culture of poetry, indeed within any nomic culture of literature, literally *a way* of life: the common path, the shared avenue, the main street of the culture, the thoroughfare created so that all will walk it, see the intended shops, buy the intended goods, and thus justify the paving of the thoroughfare, which keeps people on the intended walk, etc. Ironically, it is following the straight and narrow.

Which is not so bad a metaphor, as it speaks the expectation within the culture of literature to not stray from that main boulevard. Their want is to continue within the save and accepted (acceptable, accepting), not to adventure out and beyond. (At least, not impertinently out an beyond.) The point of the texts is not to present something newly created for the engagement of the individual; it is to present texts that fit and meet pre-existing expectations. Reading within the nomic modality is not about the experience and engagement of texts, but about the want and expectation of the known and established. Writing nomically, thus, is writing out of and to the conventions of the societal mass. In neither instance is success as regards the text found within the text itself: it is found in the texts meeting and reproducing conventions and conventionality: in its performing of the nomos. Thus, genre: which is the establishment of conventions whose purpose is to reign texts into a known classification and the known expectations of experience and meaning. (Genre is inherently opposed to the aesthetic, and vice versa, something which has been said many times by many people.)

As such, *reading shallowly* becomes a requisite act of happy life within the nomos, as reading deeply inherently opens the doors to experiences and engagements that will clash with the modality of the nomos. Reading deeply, engaging the text on its own merits and presentation, is reading aesthetically, in the modality of individual engagement, which is to say the modality of cultural heresy: it is an affront to culture to say that Lloyd Weber is little more than orchestrated pop music, or that the current Billboard #1 is

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musically and lyrically addleheaded, or that the *New York Times* best-seller list mostly charts interchangeable and literarily forgettable fiction, and that the *New York Times Review of Books* functions mostly to elevate the interchangeable and literarily forgettable to something ostensibly better, to legitimize the belief of those in the nomos that the books are of cultural merit, that they are not at all mediocre, or worse, and, in turn, that mediocre, or worse, is actually quite good enough for the crowds on the thoroughfare, and for the authors and poets the crowd upholds, favors, and acknowledges as the artistic authority.

Just as it is an affront to the culture of poetry to say that contemporary poetry is dominantly pop.

The writer's side of reading shallowly is, then, writing shallowly, writing to convention. (Which is, conveniently, much easier to do than creating ideational depth.) Sophistication is necessary only to the degree the poem can carry the generic expectations of readers. Quality exists as an external marker, generated not by the being of the poem itself but by the nomos that governs its identity. In turn, emotional/intellectual satisfaction – the reassurance of intellectuality, of individuality, of societal morality, and of those higher qualities we ascribe to literature and the arts – are satisfied when authorities ascribe to the poems such cultural markers (and in the reader being able to then perform those markers for others). Even the emotional experience is sourced outside of the text. (Again, Hallmark is ample demonstration. Or Lifetime Movie Network if you need something else. Or the performative moralities of such shows as *Blue Bloods*, or the pseudo-intellectualism of such as *CSI*.)

It is through reading depth *into* a poem that such conventions like what I call “emotion bombs” find their effectiveness. (To remind the reader, an emotion bomb is the sudden appearance of what is essentially a tag line for emotionality or philosophicality or social relevance, through which the reader is cued as to the intended poignancy or potency of the poem. A common example is a poem that is primarily first person narrative about another individual, which is of a sudden interrupted with a line such as “but she is dead now.” Poignancy and depth is cued by that single line:

there need be no ideational buildup within the rest of the poem. In fact, the rest of the poem need not even interact ideationally with the tag line. The reader sees the line, “but she is dead now,” and through it knows they can safely apply to the poem conventional and culturally accepted emotionality as to the loss of a loved one. It is on such types of *reading depth into* that Hallmark hangs its entire livelihood. If you want to add political resonance, you frame the tag line within the context some contemporary conflict. It can also be used to impersonate intellectual depth, as with a dropped allusion.)

Of course, reading shallowly does not require a nomic text. Aesthetic texts as well can have nomic meanings “read into” them (or, more accurately, “read onto” them), can have their aesthetic engagements supplanted with meanings more appropriate to and more desired by the cultural nomos: a process wholly dependent upon shallow reading. One such example is H.D.’s *Trilogy*, which suffers greatly in reception for its critics’ insistence on anchoring it in biographical and Feminist meanings. But the task of engaging *Trilogy* on its own terms is far more difficult than the easy, conventional approach of appeals to biography or cultural criticism: the latter does not require an in depth understanding of the text. In fact, I would argue with *Trilogy* it requires the ability to completely misread a text, since *Trilogy* is openly condemnatory of nomic reality, including such reading as would apply such biographical and Feminist readings, readings which are wholly rejected by the text itself, if one were only to read it. Not only its content, but its structure and poetics are argument in its own being to that end. But we do not talk about the aesthetic nature of a brilliant work: it is far more important we use that book to create and condemn patriarchic relationships between Hilda and Sigmund.²³

²³ Venting a little bile there as well. And I should point out that when I say “Feminist” there I mean a specific culture of literary and cultural criticism: that which was called to critique by Wittig, or Moi’s *Sexual/Textual Politics*. That manner of criticism is wholly nomic in its nature; where as Queer Theory as coming out of Wittig and Sedgwick, is aesthetic in nature.

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All in all, shallowness as the way of life. Read shallowly and you will never doubt your faith. Write shallowly, and you will fit right in as a performer of the faith. Let conventionality rule you, and the world is your generic oyster.

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One more (very brief) digression: In that I am now returning to the poem and the Replies, I want to give reminder of the parameters of this essay in effort to avoid any misdirected emphasis. First, it is the default condition that any culture will sediment into a *nomos* and will thus function via the modality and nature of a *nomos*. It is not supposed but assumed (and safely) that the culture of poetry in the U.S. is no different. Second, there is no proof to be found in the individual text: this is demonstration, an example through which one can then observe the greater culture of poetry. So while I will here focus on “Spook House” and the Replies particularly, it is important here to remember that the actual subject is not the poem or the Replies but the culture of pop poetry, of which they are both representative and performative.

There are two currents within the Replies as regards defense of the poem itself: (1) that concerning structure and unity, and (2) that concerning thematics and ideation. I begin with structure and unity.

Looking to the original post, the word *unity* occurs only once, the word *structure* six times. All of them are in reference to the “war” line (stanza 5) and the discussion of emotion bombs: what a bomb is, how it works in a poem, how the “war” line operates structurally within “Spook House,” and, in turn, whether the “war” line is thus a bomb.

The answer to that last question is both yes and no. On the “yes” side, the poem sets up the war line as an emotion bomb in that the poem *structurally* sets up the line for far more emphasis than any other part of the poem. It occurs in a one line stanza; it is the only one line stanza: visually, it sticks out from the poem. And not only

Whether it is still is I refrain to address.

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is it a one line stanza, it is a one line sentence: aurally, then, as well. Finally, it begins with the attention-drawing “But.” Now, I do argue the “but” in that line is a semantic error, because the but-relationship in that poem creates an absurdity.²⁴ Nonetheless, as written, that “but” creates emphasis. In fact, in combination with the other factors, it *focuses* the flow of the poem upon the idea of war. And in that the ideas of war, hostilities, combat, refugees, or the sort are frequently – and very generically – presented in pop poetry through emotion bombs, the line very much fits the character of a bomb.

On the “no” side, however, there is the fact that death does appear throughout the poem. So there is some tangential ideational presence of the “war” idea (through the commonality of death) in the poem even before the presence of the bomb. Indeed, the combination of the presence of death coupled with the structural emphasis on the war line makes it very easy to read the final lines of the poem –

but I'm thinking of how we entered
the *Inferno* two at a time
in little cars on a greasy track,
how a bar lowered across our laps
and two black doors swung open
as we watched our friends
before us disappear around a dark curve.

– as a description of young men going off to war, and of the impending death of the young men of the region served by the fair.

There are two primary moments as concerns unity and structure in the Replies, found in the openings of the first two. The first we have already seen in the above discussion on authority (I

²⁴ Combining stanzas 4 and 5 you get this idea: *This was the summer of the suicide and of drought; but there wasn't a war then.* Notice, it is not “there wasn't the war yet”: which would make the line something marking the time of the scene. It is simply “but there wasn't a war then.” Which, using the “but” as a “but” should be used, means “there was suicide and drought, but at least there wasn't a war.” Which is does not work.

will again give full context):

I find your fixation on structural unity quaint. It seems as if you've read nothing on poetics published since *The Well Wrought Urn*. You might consider updating your poetics to include at least the last quarter of the previous century. You might not find postmodern poetics compelling, but some familiarity with it would perhaps at least save you from looking like an ass.

How does it perform as an argument as to unity? Exactly as I described the nomic shallow reading/writing of poetry. There is no real argument. Despite Myers's own want for proof, argument is replaced with generic performance, with convention-located meaning-making: which is to say exactly as would be expected by the culture of poetry. The oft used *Well Wrought Urn* is brought out as recognized symbol for “uptight poetics of the past”; the phrase “postmodern poetics” is trotted out as symbol for “poetics of the now”; the argument is won. The critique of the poem's unity is defeated without presenting ideas from out of either the post, the *Well Wrought Urn*, or postmodern poetics – which is yet wholly sufficient to the task at hand, and wholly demonstrative of shallow writing/reading. What has happened is a call to accepted contemporary conventionality: postmodern poetics = good; *Well Wrought Urn* = bad; ergo any discourse on unity or structure is outdated and meaningless, and any poem that emulates postmodern poetics is meritable. Argument by cultural cue.²⁵

²⁵ Do not let the simplicity of the moment be deceptive or permit dismissiveness. You can see this very thing performed continually on established poetry blogs and in critical books. There are, simply, in these texts, more words offered to justify the attachment of the cultural meanings. But in the end, it is argument primarily by symbol. It is another example of shallow reading, necessitated so frequently because the argument is, in the end, untenable should the content of the sources actually be engaged. One example might be the condemnation of books such as Fussell's on the grounds of it being an argument for the superiority

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Indeed, the argument itself is supplanted by cultural symbol, meaning, and performance. This is seen even in the Replies in the attempt to ground the structure argument in proof out of the poem, as happens in the Reply 2. The irony of it has no small humor:

Your concept of unity is so narrow and wooden as to be absurd, as if every poem that mentions death must offer a death's head in every line. I can well imagine the kind of mind-numbingly boring and predictable verse in which such a concept of unity must result.

I don't think anyone could derive narrowness or wooden-ness from my words on unity and structure. Indeed, I speak of unity and structure from an organic viewpoint of the poem: that is, that created out of the medium of the poem and evidenced by the poem itself. Which is the opposite of narrow and wooden since the nature of a poem's unity will always reside in and be spoken by the poem itself. But, from the other side the statement, from the nomic side, there is very much a way that an organic concept of structure can be narrow: when it interferes with the nomic application of meaning to the poem. When a person is unable to defend their poem based on a kind of poetics – which is actually to say when that obstructive poetics is not jiving with the poetics that does justify the merits of the poem – then those obstructive poetics must obviously be too narrow and too wooden. (Again, actual engagement between the two poetics is avoided: shallow reading over deep reading.)

of formal verse, which postmodern poetics has “obviously” defeated. Except that were the ideas of the two texts (the “quaint” critical text and whatever text of postmodernist poetics) actually read deeply, the result is far more than often (1) the defeat of the accusation against the quaint from within the quaint because its words were never actually engaged and the accusation is found, once engaged, untenable; and (2) the defeat of the accusation against the quaint from within the postmodern poetics, because there was never really an argument present in the text, only appeal to cultural “truth” via nomic symbol.

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Notice the characteristic of the accusation of narrowness and woodenness: *it does not let everyone and everything into the fold*. Which is the very direction toward which nomic modality will generally move: it will establish itself in mediocrity so that as many as is possible can participate in the social group and perform the truth of the nomos: a necessity for any stable, nomic culture. Thus why those that stray from the nomos are demonized: they are no longer of the social body; and, more threateningly, they have espoused an idea that threatens the valuations that define and give order to that social body: pop poetry through and through. The action here is the same as that seen above with emotionality, only directed at poetics rather than the person themselves: it is the poetics that is here stripped of authority and demonized – called quaint and outdated – thus reaffirming the rightness of postmodern poetics and the value of the poetry of postmodern poetics. The authority of postmodern poetics has been affirmed, therefore the poem is “good” – in more than one sense of the word. Were the poetics to be one that gave esteem to the 1% to the detriment of the 99%, the nomos would never exist far beyond the circle of that 1%, if it could exist at all.

In the Replies, the degree of surety in the performance of nomic characterizing and defining is abundant – as regards both the quality of the poem and the invalidity of the original post. It is demonstrated in the previously mentioned expectations revealed in the opening words of Reply 2: “I think my response may have been too subtle for you” (as described in the previous section). It is overwhelming in Myers’s attempt to ground his defense of “Spook House” in the poem itself. That defense, if read shallowly, succeeds, because it performs what it needs to perform: it gives the readers the meaning of the poem and the justifications to the acceptance of the meaning of the poem. Reading the poem deeply, aesthetically, however, the argument fails in its own absurdity and shallowness – particularly in that moment offered above. I will give it again:

Your concept of unity is so narrow and wooden as to be absurd, as if every poem that mentions death must offer a death’s head in every line. I can well

imagine the kind of mind-numbingly boring and predictable verse in which such a concept of unity must result. [etc.]

Absurdity: When you look at the poem, there can be found *sixteen* references to or images of death in the first six stanzas of the poem²⁶: eleven direct and five indirect references, to which you can add a final scene that is itself a commonplace – if not even trite – reference to death (that of “we watched our friends before us disappear around a dark curve”). Doing the math, it comes out to only one death’s head every two-and-a-half-lines: still plenty enough to make a puzzle out of how Myers does not himself see what is an ever-present, dominating idea within his own poem.

Shallowness: His own poetics avoids – and voids – such evidence and readings:

Your insistence that it must be a “poem generally about death” reveals an understanding of theme barely on a level with Cliff’s Notes.

There is for Myers no such teeming population of death’s heads in “Spook House” (oh! I forgot the title: seventeen). The reason is that the *intended* meaning – the meaning established through the authority of the poet (as confirmed through the poetics of the *nomos*) – supplants any meaning generated by the poem itself. The meaning of the poem, the skin of the poem, lies elsewhere. Specifically, in the author’s *abscription* of meaning:

²⁶ Eleven are mostly direct (lines numbers are given):

<i>Dante’s Inferno</i> (3)	earth cracked and flaked (33-4)
slashed in red on black (3)	war (35)
blinking eyes of the damned (7)	dead grass (37)
executioner (23)	gravestones (38)
killed himself (31)	crows (39)
drought (32)	

In such a dominant context of death, others – things not uncommonly used as tenors to the idea of death – enter the list:

livestock (5)	shrieks and groans (25-6)
manure (18)	bleats from sheep (27-8)

Finally, there is the nude woman/rebel flag mirrors, discussed below.

If you had bothered to think about the poem for a moment, it might have occurred to you that, rather than being simply a poem about death, it is a poem about the trauma and uncertainty of entering adulthood: the naked woman, the rebel flag, the suicide, the drought, the war all standing as emblems for that uncertainty regarding sex, politics, death, livelihood, war and other adult concerns.

The whole of it is important, but we have to break it up. (Obviously, we are now into the second current of the defense, that of ideation.)

“If you had bothered to think about the poem”: it is not a passing phrase. It is establishing the poem within the idea of intellectuality – a positive trait for a poem in any context. It is echoed in the next sentence: “rather than *simply* being a poem about death”: there is a greater reading, a more subtle reading, a more profound reading than what I have seen myself. Which is to say from within the authority structure of the nomos of poetry, than what I am capable of seeing myself – which is not merely a slur.²⁷ The statement is effort to establishing the quality of the poem, and is performed in the standard way: the Replies as a whole are just such performance: the poem’s quality is established in that an authority (the poet, who is also a professor of literature) is speaking the poem as quality, and the attacks upon that quality are dismissed through the diminishment of the authority and presence of the questioner. This is quality throughout any nomic culture: quality and importance exists wholly within the ascription of that character to a text by authorities: quality – just as with meaning – is *performed*. The text need only support through shallow reading that ascription. All that is needed after that is for that quality to be performed by someone else: which establishes the meaning as truth within the nomos. The *Review of Books* says a book is important; the readers accept the truth of the statement and reiterate it through

²⁷ The granting of the ability to see the correct meaning points back to Part II: only a person of accepted authority has the ability to see the correct meaning. Everyone else accepts the meaning in a pedagogical disposition.

their own words or wallets, and the book *is*, thus, important. “Spook House” is a smart poem. Its meaning is about “trauma and uncertainty.” All I needed to do is “think about the poem” and I would have seen it.²⁸

Except, can the poem really sustain that reading? Or, is this poem *simply* about death? No, not even as I read it, even with its instabilities. For me, there is such structural importance placed upon that “war” line that the idea of war has to somehow couple with the continual presence of death, even if imperfectly – thus my seeing the final scene as the stereotypical image of children who will in the near future become soldiers sent to war. I read “Spook House” a poem that is mostly a scene whose whole purpose seems to be to present a stream of images of death, book-ended by a scene that contextualizes it as a flashback (itself a very common convention of contemporary poetry, and cue for poetic quality), and which has a low-yield emotion bomb about war thrown in it, which gives it some form of topical resonance. For me, that is a fairly safe reading of the poem.

But the intended meaning of the poem is: “it is a poem about the trauma and uncertainty of entering adulthood.”²⁹ The assertive stance and language is not to be missed. He is giving the world the meaning of the poem, yes. However, that act is not a reading of the poem but an assertion of meaning. By the conventions of the nomos, now that we have been given the meaning of the poem, we should then *accept* the meaning of the poem as given, needing only sufficient tie between the meaning and the text of the poem to justify its assertion. That this is in fact a nomic performance – shallow writing and reading – is demonstrated throughout the argument of defense of the poem in now Myers is himself seems blind to what how the poem actually reads, and reads in the poem

²⁸ This is something you can watch happen at poetry readings.

²⁹ (The word “intended” is not there pejorative but descriptive.)

the meaning he has himself applied to it.³⁰

Which is again nothing peculiar within an established culture: that is how the nomos handles the writing and reading of texts. The text is written with the meaning already in existence: the poem does not create its own reading, and does not need to. The writing process revolves instead around some basic idea for the setting of the text: here, an adult is remembering about the first time he heard of Dante, and the poem describes the scene of that remembrance. The poem is then written out of and through contemporary conventionality: poetry as sentences broken into lines; stanzas that are defined by the sentences; grammar sufficient to the enterprise without being too difficult (even if not quite successful); some emotional pop; conventional flashback from within an I-narrative; a touch of allusion to create intellectuality; finally, enough and sufficient phrasing for the intended meaning.

Everything else is irrelevant.

The concern with the ideas generated by the text itself sits back seat to the appeals to conventionality. Blatant contradictions to intent – as will be seen with the Ferris wheel lines – is simply bypassed. Even unintentional ideas or clumsiness created by poor grammar (things that would never pass in prose) is overlooked through the shallowness of the reading/writing process: it is “postmodern poetics,” ergo it is justified. It is all simply not of concern. Successful writing of a nomic poem needs only the successful creation of enough hooks upon which to drape the meaning. Thus the success that can be found in the use of an emotion bomb: one very large hook that can sustain a meaning intended for a poem, a poem that in every other way has absolutely no relationship therewith:

I remember
a day walking in the park
where she was

³⁰ Every honest person would admit experiencing someone saying to them “this doesn’t mean what you think it means” with texts they themselves wrote.

counting the trees
and laughing at
kids playing on the
playground.
But she is dead now.

(In case you were wondering, I just made that up. It is quite conventional, actually.) A culture of shallow writing which both prompts and requires shallow reading – lest the culture be revealed for what it is; a culture of shallow reading that expects and needs shallow writing – lest it be revealed for what it is: that is a *nomos*.

It is actually not at all surprising or unexpected when a nomic poet claims a meaning for a poem that is not generated or sustained by the poem. It is seen in print all the time, especially with political/topical poetry. The fact that the far majority of “Spook House” is a continuous flow of images of physical and spiritual death and finality is irrelevant to Myers’s own reading: obviously – if only I knew enough about poetry to be able to read and critique it – it is about trauma.

It is important to note the word there is *irrelevant*. It is false to say a nomic poet gets the poetry *wrong* in their writing. It is not a matter of error, it is a matter of what can be ignored and what is meant to be seen. As said, this feeds into the statements in the Replies that the ideas of unity and structure running within the post are narrow and wooden: because if they were valid, they would exclude the reading that is applied to the text. How *can* the text not be about death if there is so much death in the poem? How *can* the text not be about war even though there is such strong emphasis and direction placed on the war line? The answer is: the poem is not so because postmodern poetics. The phrasing is not in error: the justification ultimately lies in the *appeal* to the authority, not the internal, argumentative validity of that authority.³¹

³¹ A rather large body of contemporary poetry has found a rather simple solution to this problem of unintentional imagery: write poems that are so ideationally thin there is nothing with which to generate anything more

Again: “If you had bothered to think about the poem for a moment, it might have occurred to you that [. . .] it is a poem about the trauma and uncertainty of entering adulthood.” In honesty, that *never* would have occurred to me. Though, after Myers’s explanation, I can see the hooks he is using to justify the meaning.

because death is obviously only part of what is meant by the “dark [curve]” in my poem. The image is clearly one of uncertainty. Think of Dante descending into Hell. [. . .] He will ascend again into Purgatory and eventually Paradise, but Dante the pilgrim is not so sure.

“Clearly” – still, I will explain it.³² The key to the poem as Myers defines it is in the last stanza, back at the desk of the adult narrator. There, it is not the *Inferno* that is on the desk but the whole of “a copy / of *La Commedia*” – with two more on the shelf. From the presence of the whole of the trilogy comes the idea of passage *through* (and up) – after all, the journey of the character of Dante does not end at the ninth circle of Hell. Once the meaning of “passage” exists in the poem, we can redefine the closing moment in the carnival ride not as an image of death but as an image of passage, even though there is nothing in the scene that gives energy to the idea of an exit from the coming darkness. Once that ride is identified as “passage through” (even though that identification is external to the poem itself), the darkness in the ride can move away from the by-then-firmly-established idea of death to that of uncertainty. Finally, now that you have the idea of uncertainty embedded in the darkness, you can recast the entire poem, and find instead of endless death’s heads the “emblems of uncertainty” that Myers lists in the Reply: the naked woman, the rebel flag, the suicide, the drought, the war.

Rebel flag? Ok, that one’s paper thin. But, that is probably the

than surface ideas to begin with. The attached – though still wholly unjustified – meanings then sit rather comfortably upon their texts.

³² This is the path I find makes the most sense.

least of the problems with the trauma and uncertainty reading. For if you read the poem aesthetically, if you read it not to look for justifications of the applied meaning but to see what ideas are actually generated by the text, the idea of “the trauma and uncertainty of entering adulthood” is found to be wholly rejected by the poem itself.

1. Outside of what we are supposed to read from the presence of the phrase “*La Commedia*,” nowhere else in the poem is there the idea of “passage *through*.” Indeed, when Dante first appears in the poem, he is immediately linked not to the whole of *La Commedia*, but to the *Inferno* specifically – which is followed by the barrage of death.
2. In fact, the first six stanzas of the poem speak overwhelmingly *against* the notion of “a passage through.” First there is the general context of death – which is not at all the same thing as a guided tour of Hell. Then there is the more specific moment of suicide. Beyond that, there is the Ferris wheel, which reminded the boy
of a queen I saw
in a movie once, raising
her head to meet the eye
of the executioner.

It is an image of a ride (a ride, just like the spook house ride) that *goes up* – which, yes, is the orientation of *La Commedia* once it leaves Hell – but then *goes down back to the finality of death*. Could you have a more explicit statement of the *denial* of “passage through”? Is there after that idea any reason to think that the spook house ride at the end of the poem will not also turn down toward and end in death?

3. Indeed, there is no effort to instill the idea of “passage through” in any other of the elements of the poem. As said, it is not inherently in the final scene. The presence of some kind of light, or shadow play, something that pointed to what lay beyond the dark would give reason to reach forward and make it a passage through. Instead, there is only a turn into darkness, which, within the context of the poem, can almost only be read

as symbolic death. One would think any good reader would find the intentional absence of “passage through” – in moments where it could exist – important to the reading of the poem.

4. While I am not a scholar of the work, ever in all my years have I ever heard *The Divine Comedy* talked about in the nature of a bildungsroman. So it should not be that strange that “passage to adulthood” is not exactly brought to mind by the presence of either the *Inferno* one or the *La Commedia* as a whole.
5. The age of the boy is but of ten years. Change the age to fifteen and the nude woman, the suicide, and the war would come into greater resonance. But ten? Explicitly stating the age as ten is explicitly stating the age is *not* fifteen – or fourteen, or sixteen. That is, it is explicitly stating the boy is *not* in the midst of physical, mental, and emotional change. By specifically stating “ten” – which is still in grammar school – the poem is defining the moment of remembrance as *before* those changes; even, within a point of naïve ignorance of such changes. Because the boy is only ten, the sexuality of the nude woman is mostly removed. And in that the woman is coupled with a rebel flag, the mirror idea reads to me – and this is how I originally read it – at most as a statement about the trite banality of the fairgrounds. As such, the woman and flag mirrors move away from “passage to adulthood” and become yet another moment of symbolic death.
6. Really, there is not even any *trauma* in the poem. Trauma occurs on the far side of an event. Every image in this poem is before any event. Of the two that explicitly move to the far side, the first, the Ferris wheel, ends in and at death, and the second, the framing scene at the desk, speaks nothing of trauma whatsoever. The boy is not given a single adjective by which to call him nervous. Indeed, considering the source of his want to ride the Ferris wheel, I would say he was quite the opposite of nervous.
7. Likewise, is there even any uncertainty? It is pretty much all death. There’s no equivocation in the argument. (At most, I can find only the irregular “but” leading off the war line.)

8. This is a framed poem: it is flashback. The part that is the boy at the fair is *narrated by* the adult. Which is to say *it is the adult* that is choosing the words, which gives the dwelling on death all the more emphasis. The fact that the narrator speaks sixteen reference of death, and that the narrator has decided *not* to instill the remembrance with the ideas of “passage through” or trauma or uncertainty is emphatic statement and guidance as to the character and reading of the flashback. The scene is being interpreted by the narrator himself: and as a reader we should listen.

All and all, evidence and proof beyond enough that the idea of “the trauma and uncertainty of entering adulthood” is an wholly applied meaning to the poem. That Myers can yet assert such a meaning, that he is blinded enough to the degree of death in his own poem that he does not see the death’s heads on every third line, that he does not see that the Ferris wheel lines wholly contradict his own intended meaning, and that his defense of the poem – and the assault on my literary acumen – is predicated and evidenced through a meaning that is rejected by the poem is astounding demonstration of how Myers reads the poem – of *how* Myers reads the poem – and thus of how Myers wrote the poem and how Myers anticipates how his readers will read the poem.

But we must remove these ideas from the specificity of Myers, because the aim of this essay here is not to be found in this single example, but in that it demonstrates the nomos – and the functioning there of – of contemporary poetry, within which Myers finds the conventions, valuations, and meanings of poetry. This is a good poem – why? Because it has been published; because it has been read publically (I am sure to approval); because it can be spoken of by a meaning that performs wonderfully the nomos of the culture of poetry and fits well within the generic expectations of what “good poetry” is all about. It has a meaning that can be appropriately applied to the text; it carries one or more of the conventional profound thoughts of literature; it can be read without challenge or offense to the nomos as a whole. It is a good poem.

It should be noted that that the meaning of the poem is not

generated by the poem itself – not through any honest reading of it – does not mean the applied meaning is an *incorrect* meaning, not from the nomic standpoint. An incorrect meaning is the *wrong* meaning: which is to say that (1) the poem does have a nomic meaning, and (2) what is offered is also a nomic meaning, only (3) it is not the right one. An incorrect meaning is a meaning that lacks grounding in authority; but it is still a *meaning*. And, thus, how there can be contestations of meaning within the nomic, which are really contestations over authorities. The “trauma” meaning *is* the correct meaning within the nomos, because it is the authorized meaning. And here we return to that word *irrelevant*: unity, structure, emphasis, the ever-presence of death within the poem, the weak use of the *Inferno*, are *irrelevant* to the making/assigning of meaning and to the perceived (received) quality of the poem.

All these issues I raise with the poem -- the issues of ideation, structure, and even grammar, syntax, and semantics -- are taken out of the reading of the poem by the use of convention, conventionality understood and expected (if not demanded) on the part of readership, and understood and provided (if not expected) on the part of writership.

Take for but one example the flashback structure, a common convention in pop poetry. The flashback in "Spook House," as it is generally used, establishes the structure of "that was then, this is now." And, indeed, a flashback structure can be used aesthetically to create just such a ideational structure within the poem. The key words there, however, are *can* and *create*. In an aesthetic poem, where the poem generates its own self, the flashback structure is put to use within the poem: it is a structure upon which the idea of "that was then, this is now" can be developed. But it need not be so, and in pop poetry it rarely is so. Rather, the structure is there used as a convention: by putting the poem in the recognizable and accepted flashback structure, the idea of "that was then, this is now" is *grafted* on the poem through appeal to poetic convention. The poem itself does not have to do any of the ideational work. There need not be, in the poem, any contrast established ideationally between the "that" and the "this." Which is the case in "Spook House." Here are all the

lines that can be said to refer to the "present tense" of the adult (the numbers are the line numbers):

- (1) The first I heard of Dante
- (2) was at the county fair when I was ten,
- (3) *Dante's Inferno* slashed in red on a black [trailer, etc.]

- (41) Years later, there is a copy
- (42) of *La Commedia* on my desk
- (43) while I write this, and two
- (44) more editions on the shelf,
- (45) But I'm thinking of how we entered
- (46) The *Inferno* two at a time [etc.]³³

What is being presented within the poem? What ideas are being generated within the poem? More importantly, as we are looking at the use of the appeal to convention to generate ideas, what ideas are *not* being generated within the poem?

Primarily, there is no real contrast created between the "then" and the "now." In fact, the "now" is wholly empty of ideation: it is an empty scene. There is nothing within the scene to establish what is the nature of the moment. Myers's reading of "Spook House" hinges on the idea of the presence of *La Commedia* in the present moment generates the "passage through" idea. There are two problems with that dependency, however. Even if we accept the idea that *La Commedia* could present the idea of "passage through," it exists within the poem with but the barest presence, especially in that

1. No one would naturally link the Dante of *La Commedia* to a ten year old boy (never mind to the "trauma and uncertainty" of oncoming adulthood). Within the context of

³³ Of course, there is also the disputed line:

- (35) But there wasn't a war then.

In that the poem is framed within a flashback, it is a quite natural reading that "then" in that line refers to the time of the present tense. But it can also be read as a later moment of flashback. Either way, the "then," in conjunction with the flashback structure, gives even *more* structural importance to that war line.

the total poem -- which includes the flashback scene -- there is little (if anything) to prompt the idea of "passage through" out of the presence of *La Commedia*.

2. The opening of the the moment text of the poem preceding the mention of *La Commedia* is overwhelmingly about death and finality, which makes the all but tangential idea of "passage through" very weak in comparison. If the poem was meant to be a "then = bad" "now = good" poem (or about "passage *through*"), one would think the positive would merit some strength

3. After the scene in the present moment, the poem returns to flashback in a scene that again gives no energy to the idea of "passage through." Indeed in that the poem specifically does not give energy to that idea when the opportunity for it is so readily apparent (at the turn in the ride), there is every reason to read the final scene as overtly *eliminating* any concept of "passage through."

In fact, it is quite easy to read the poem wholly against the idea of "passage through": all you need to is imagine that outside the window of the writer at his present-day desk is a world that has, for the writer, not yet escaped hell: there is still drought, there is still suicide and death, and there is now *also* war (again that line comes into importance). Then, even if you do read *La Commedia* as idea of "passage through," it is an idea that exists, within the context of the adult at his desk, only as an unrealized possibility. There never was any passage through for the writer; the flashback is indeed description of a world of death -- a world which still exists. Indeed, in this reading that final scene takes on new relevance, one merited both by its position within the as the final, culminating scene ("but I'm thinking of"), and by its refusal to offer any ideation of "passage through": that is, the final scene is not at all a moment of "trauma and uncertainty," but a moment of resignation and absolute certainty. The boy is in the Inferno, and the boy will never escape it. (And there the Ferris wheel scene also takes on actual purpose and strength.)

There is nothing of strength in the poem to refute the idea that

in the "that was then, this is now" structure suggested by the use of flashback there is no difference between the "then" and the "now." Indeed, by what was described above, there is plenty in the poem to reinforce it. So how then does the poem carry the "passage through" idea of "then = bad" and "now = good"? By appeal to a poetic convention: when a flashback occurs in a poem, the reader is supposed to read into the poem the idea of "that was then, this is now," and then should ideationally structure the poem into an opposing of the "then" and the "now."

None of which is inherent to the poem. All of which exists within the genre and conventions of pop poetry -- and is quite frequently seen. Thus, the shallow writing of pop poetry, and the shallow reading of pop poetry: you do not create ideas, you use conventions; you do not read ideas out of the poem, you look for and apply the appealed to conventions.

Such is the nature of the nomic, and of the contemporary culture of poetry. And, as is my point-which-is-not-a-point, none of this should be surprising. Indeed, nor should it be surprising that, within the culture of pop poetry, there is a well established and at times elegantly performed³⁴ defense of contemporary poetry that goes *you are not supposed to read it that closely*: a justification for shallowness in *both* reading and writing that permits positive valuation of a great mass of contemporary poetry despite the poetics of previous poets, critics, and theorists, who would and did insist that yes, you are supposed to read it that closely: that is the whole nature, purpose, and joy of poetry.

Here I turn to give time to the aesthetic modality of reading, which is not about *meaning*, but about *validity*. I read a poem. I develop a reading of the poem, an *experience* of the poem, paying attention to structure, text, sound, reference, etc. I am satisfied with that reading of the poem. A second person reads the same poem. They generate their reading of the poem – and it is *different*, substantially, we will say, from my reading. Is my reading, or the

³⁴ Which is to say a defense for shallowness that does not at all appear like a defense for shallowness.

other person’s reading incorrect? *No*. Because they are both the *individual experience of the poem*. But, now we compare our readings, and (assuming open-minded engagement) explore the strengths and weaknesses of each reading, exchange information, trace out structure and ideation. Is this then now searching for the correct meaning? *No*. It is *re-reading*. Meaning is of course part of the reading of the poem, for every person is both of a nomic and an aesthetic character, and as every text must function in some part in both the nomic and aesthetic modalities. However, aesthetic “meaning” is not fixed meaning, but ideation. Yes, the nomic aspect of the poem is nomic meaning, but it is not all defining, and it will always only be a part of the experience of the poem. For in the aesthetic, it is the experience that is the point – thus its inherent relation with individuality.

But back to the exchange of readings and ideas and information: the mutual re-reading of the poem. What is happening in the comparison is not about correctness of one reading as opposed to another, but about the *validity* of a reading: can I justify my reading of the text by the text. If I can, then my re-reading is valid to me – even if it is not valid to the other person. After all, again, we are individuals, with different lives, different experiences, different knowledges, different sophistications. We are going to read – if we are *really* reading – differently. So, through the exchange of experiences we modify our own reading and experience the poem now in a new way, more valid each to ourselves – even if we both walk away from the poem still with somewhat different experiences of the poem.³⁵

³⁵ Which does not create the situation of infinite meaning to any poem. Generally, if a person with more knowledge as to the details of the poem will be offering information absent to a person of less knowledge. Generally, a person of higher sophistication will be offering a more sophisticated reading to a person of less sophistication, and generally, that latter person’s sophistication will increase in the exchange.

Which does not in turn mean that over time readings will coalesce into a “meaning”: there will still always be the element of individuality. But,

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It is an event, a view of literature, which wholly undermines a nomic culture of poetry. For within that culture, not only is meaning applied externally and conventionally to poems, the *truth* of meaning is applied to poems, and also the truth of *value*. Critique can exist within the culture of poetry only insofar as it does not upset that culture, only insofar as it exhibits good taste. Myers’s critique of Mary Oliver’s book, which he brings up in Reply 5 as another tag of authority, stays very solidly and safely within the bounds of good taste. Of course, my own approach to Myers’s poem does not quite do such – as Myers does point out in Reply 4:

and I would still urge you not to attempt public discussion beyond your capabilities, as to do so is unethical and damaging.

Unethical? That is by far the most unexpected word within all five Replies. *Unethical*? Since when do you need a license to talk about poetry? The word reveals just how embedded Myers’s replies are within a social nomos. For him the idea of an average joe daring to talk about poetry out of their own being – daring to read poetry from their own experience and knowledge – is *unethical*: a *violation* of the order of things; a violation of social caste and definition. The meaning of poetry, the reading of poetry, is the domain of those who know what they are doing: and only then, are the results *authoritative*. It is moments like this that reaffirm that the total of these replies are not emotional outbursts but are performances of a cultural world-view. The severity of it does not speak to the nature of the poetic nomos being revealed here, but the degree of investment on the part of the poet. Speaking about poetry in a public forum without formal qualification reaches for Myers the level an *unethical* act, a supreme violation of good taste: someone had the audacity to read his poem on their own, to speak of poetry on their own, without formal training and outside the status that one gains from acceptance within the culture of poetry, and dared to speak about the poem outside the accepted social and moral

there is also the limits of the poem: a simple poem will not offer as much to re-read as a larger, more intricate poem.

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parameters of the culture of poetry.

I hyperbolize my language a touch to try to make evident the degree that a nomic world-view *functions to repress and eliminate* the validity of the individual's experience with poetry. The only time speaking such experience is acceptable is if the person accepts the status of untrained, of unknowledged, and of willingness to be corrected. (And I cannot but think here of the critiques of MFA culture creating an industry based upon the mimicry of mentors, which is nothing if not a pedagogical formalization of good taste and authority.) In every act – be it the writing, the reading, the speaking about – the nomic culture will defend itself. To speak outside that culture – to reject the meanings intended by the authors, to critique beyond one's permitted bounds or beyond the culture defending ethics of good taste, is not just an affront but a *threat* to the nomos. And as such, a threat and an affront to the world view of those persons participatory in that nomos: all the more for each to the degree that they are invested in the social meaning provided by that nomos.

Within the affront to good taste there lies some justification to the violence and degree of insult within the Replies as a whole, as seen in those nearly-as-unexpected moments in Reply 3:

As it stands, don't spit on me and act indignant when I respond in kind. [. . .] I suspect you failed to consider that there might be a real person on the other end of the poem you decided to unjustly trash. You thought you could just spew your nonsense into the blogosphere and not get called out on it. You've simply failed to think humanely and responsibly about what you are doing.

It is understatement to say that I find it beyond bizarre that a supposedly professional author - a published PhD – is pulling out the “consider the feelings of the author” card. Yes, there is always in ego element in publishing; but if you can't take the heat, why are you doing it? (And I do not mean that in any derogatory manner. I mean it from a point of mental health: do not do it if it is not good

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for you. I speak this from my own experience.)³⁶ Beyond that, it is only when there is a world-view challenged that you see such a response anchored in ideas like “unethical” and “humanely and responsibly” – especially when the “unethical” person is perceived as being a nobody with a soap box, generally the easiest of people to ignore. The fact that he could not so ignore me – to the tune of five independent Replies – speaks loudly to that the original post was not, to him, merely a nobody on a soapbox. Something *needed* to be done.

And this is performance. And there was an audience. And considering I doubt that Myers spends time reading blogs like mine, I am sure the post about his poem was brought to his attention by one of his students. I am equally sure the performance here was more for them (in instruction) and himself (in affirmation) than it was for me. Which is an important aspect of the *nomos*: it serves itself and the people who hold to it. Others are of no concern (so long as they can be ostracized). The performance here was moral demonstration for the watching students: to speak out against the status is unethical, inhumane, and irresponsible. To not accept the status quo is likewise. To be a critic is to be an *acceptable* critic.

••α••

Step back a second, so that I may speak in the rhetoric of the blog, which I attempt to always aim toward the *writing* of poetry.³⁷

One of the repeated points of argument as to the content of the poem – already touched on above – is the use of the *Inferno* within the poem. This was the source of what was originally perceived as an ad hominem attack in the first Reply. The intended point in the post was that the allusion to the *Inferno/Commedia* in the poem has

³⁶ I am not here speaking of writing poetry, I am speaking of publishing that poetry.

³⁷ While there is much theory about the aesthetic, and some criticism that comes out of the aesthetic, there is very little written from the point of the *writing* – and of developing sophistication – in the aesthetic mode of being.

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no real depth. There is nothing in the poem, really, that interacts with the ideas within Dante’s work. Within the first six stanzas of the poem, the *Inferno* is reduced to a simple symbol of death, just as with all the other symbols. The immediate coupling with a fair ride trivializes its presence, turns it into kitsch. It is only the opening line of “first time I heard of Dante” that keeps the book in any way in the forefront. Yet, it is “Dante” we read, and immediately after “*Inferno*,” and not until the end does *La Commedia* appear. So even from the start there is some misdirection as to the desired importance of the complete trilogy. Outside intended reading, the allusion dies at the author and title; and, in the end, there is nothing in this poem that could not have been written by someone whose entire extent of knowledge on Dante came from speed reading the intro to a Wikipedia entry. And even that is more than is needed.

Which makes the turn here to considerations of *writing* somewhat interesting. For the simplest demonstration – and perhaps the most fruitful demonstration – as to the shallowness of the poem, but more importantly and instructively as to the failures of ideational development and coherency within the poem, lies within the use of the *Inferno* and the fact that the poem rises an order of magnitude in strength and ideational energies if you but substitute *Heart of Darkness*. The book maintains the ideational association with death, but also wholly establishes the idea of passage, and even of trauma and uncertainty. All three ideas would have been introduced by the third line. What an obvious choice! What a better choice!

Indeed, what is astounding with this poem as concerns the intended meaning is just how many explicit decisions in the poem’s writing work *against* the intended meaning: by not choosing something in the writing of the poem that works *for* the intended meaning, the poem will then through that choice speak *against* it. If you choose a person whose age is generally perceived as prior to puberty, then you are *explicitly not choosing* puberty. If you choose an idea of a Ferris wheel whose descent is linked to death, then you are *explicitly not choosing* an idea about “passage through.” If you choose

not to give some idea of something lying beyond the darkness around the curve of the ride, then you are *explicitly not choosing* “passage through.” If you choose a book that is not about passage into adulthood – even if it can be twisted into linking to it – then you are *explicitly not choosing* passage into adulthood. If you choose language that is not artistic or poetic, but actually rather ordinary (if not bad) prose, then you are *explicitly not choosing* poetics. If you do not choose to craft lines, then you are *explicitly not choosing* poetic lines and breaks.

It is unavoidable: a poem does create its own ideational energies out of the words chosen and their arrangement. Creative writing is about generating, out of the medium of language, those creative energies. In toto, if you choose language that does not generate such energies, or if you choose language that does not generate energies to the ends you wish, then you are *explicitly not choosing* to generate your hoped for poem. Which is to say, in the more abstract, you are *not choosing* sophistication in your creative writing.

IV. SUMMATION, CONCLUSION, AND THE INEVITABLE *J'ACCUSE*

Yes, the saying that “99% of anything is crap” is a touch hyperbolic in the use of the word “crap”: there is in every society some degree of quality control, and so most of the 99% would actually lie within the mediocre rather than the god-awful. (Though, *mediocre* is a relative term – something directly to my point.) It is nonetheless worth the while keeping the phrase to heart as a warning, lest your forget and use “J.J. Abrams” and “*auteur*” in the same sentence.

Let’s take as a for instance Major League Baseball. It might not seem to apply to MLB that “99% of anything is crap” – presumably meaning 99% of all Major League baseball players are crap. It does, however, but you need to expand the context to its fullest. Every Major League team has beneath it seven or eight or so minor league teams. (And below that there are the college teams, and then

independent leagues, etc.) And while I would still not call those players crap, they are for the majority well set within the mediocre, or even the sub-par, when they are compared to the players of the major league. Like an iceberg, Major League Baseball is but the more visible top ninth of a much larger mass.

What is important is to recognize that Major League Baseball has a vested interest in bringing the best players to the top: it is, bluntly, to their financial gain. The appeal to the fans is firmly rested in that desire for excellence: it is, after all, an arena of competition. The fans want excellence upon the field (not only in their Major League team, but also in the team’s farm system). So, while the 99% rule can be said to apply to baseball, the *culture* of baseball is governed by that desire for excellence. The members of a AA team know that they are in AA because of their level of baseball sophistication, as it were. They are comfortable, emotionally, at that level because they play in a league whose members all play at that level. They also know, should they surpass that level, they will rise into the AAA ranks, and from there, potentially, into the show.

If we move to the culture of pop music, there is no such governing desire, even though financial gain is still the primary energies of the industry. That is because for music to make the most money, it needs to be broadly popular, and so broadly appealing. Thus the push to conventionality, familiarity, to playing to expectation, to the use of the ‘hook’ as a song’s identity as opposed to true creativity, to the resistance if not active avoidance of idiosyncrasy and sophistication. As Billy Joel spoke of it:

It was a beautiful song but it ran too long
If you’re gonna have a hit you gotta make it fit
So they cut it down to 3:05

The more sophisticated the music, the more effort is required on the part of the listener; the more idiosyncratic the music, the smaller will be the receptive audience. Both limit, greatly, the range of appeal. For music to appeal to the mainstream, it must be mainstream. Songs written by Benjamin Britten may be more sophisticated and aesthetically brilliant than songs written by Taylor

Swift, but Britten will never go platinum.³⁸

Pop music – even for its degree of corporate-manipulation – is a functioning cultural nomos. Conventionality rules; quality is adjudicated by appeal and not by sophistication; merit is granted to those that most effectively perpetuate the system. (And in those words I have given definition to the Grammys.) Thus, a nomos will always pull to mediocrity, and to persons that will most capably perform to the nomos.

And so my base assumption: that the culture of contemporary poetry is no different, and, in its current form, should not be expected to be any different. Success, status, professorship, the lecture and workshop circuits, financial gain, is not tied to excellence and sophistication, but to the nomos and its continued performance. And so the culture of poetry – as with any other nomic culture – sets itself to maintain the importance, value, and *rightness* of the conventional, the less sophisticated, the most broadly appealing.

Which is to say, the crap.

Within baseball, whatever the rank of the league, there is no inherent threat of inferiority, or threat to the merit of one team by any other team within or without that league. The system puts equals in competition with equals, and raises excellence up to the next level. A fan of a AA team knows that they are rooting for a AA team, and does not expect of them more than that which they are. But, they *do* expect from them AA level play. Because of all of that, there is no nomic pull to the mediocre: identity lies not in the nomic but in the *individual*: each player is that who they are, and that which they can create out of the medium that is themselves. It is a greatly aesthetic system – and we see through it the appeal and cultural status of the athletic with the Greeks.

³⁸ The lyrics are from “The Entertainer.” It is also worth here pointing out that sports teams are geographical in nature: their fanbase is for the most part their geographical region. An industry like music could exist on such a geographical fanbase – and in many ways does. But the real money is made in national, if not global appeal: thus, mainstreaming.

However, in the culture of contemporary poetry, there is no such impetus to field the best possible players and the best possible team. The drive is rather, like with popular music, toward the conventional, the expected, the generic: not just in the poetry written, but in how poetry is talked about, how poetry is read, how poetry is spoken of in critique, even how poetry – especially poetry writing – is taught.

And just to keep it clear: this is not a radical claim. This is the wholly expected nature, tendency, and status of any such culture. If the culture does not actively struggle toward otherwise, this is what the culture will become.

Establish a body of critical voices willing put labels of hyperbolic praise on anything that crosses their desk and you’ve established the mechanism by which mediocrity can be maintained as all that needs be. Establish a system that will award the type of poetry and the poets that are the least threatening to the nomos, and that are the most capable of performing the nomos, and you have established a system by which the authorities that maintain the positive valuation of the conventional are themselves maintained. Establish a system where graduate education in creative writing actively avoids theoretical discourse on the aesthetic and you’ve established a system where the up-and-comers will never be challenged to perform beyond the conventional. Establish a system of graduate education that rests primarily in contemporary poetry, rather than the great voices of the past, and you have established a system where the nomic norms are never brought into question by outside voices of brilliance and beauty.

After all, how can an MFA program successfully graduate the exceeding majority of its students – and thus continue to make money and brand identity for the university – if the culture of poetry did not accept as publishable and meritorious the output of those students?

Which sounds accusatory, except that all those establishings will happen within a culture all on their own, with no particular effort by anyone. It is the way of the nomic.

One would think that an MFA society would be dedicated to a

system where masterworks like Browning’s *The Ring and the Book* or H.D.’s *Trilogy* or Williams’s *Paterson* occur more than five or six times a century; a culture where works such as Tennyson’s “Maud,” Browning’s “The Bishop Order’s His Tomb,” or Bunting’s “Briggflatts,” or Carruth’s “Sleeping Beauty” are upheld as emblematic goals of literary endeavor.³⁹ Yet that is patently not the case. The entirety of the culture of contemporary poetry functions to the very opposite direction: to the avoidance of such critiques or standards of performance. The nomic solution is, simply, to remove such expectations: in part by isolating them as exceptions to the rule, in part by removing them from the discourse of creative writing, and in part by giving ample praise to performances that are merely mediocre – if not plain bad – such as to remove the idea that such exceptionalism is what is to be striven for.

Can you imagine a world of MFA instruction where a professor can one day find themselves in the department chair’s office, hearing, “Let’s face it – it’s not like you’ve shown any development over your last two books. The critics are hitting you like your setting it on a tee. Hell, when was the last time you pitched your way out of the sixth? So, management’s decided to buy out your contract. We’ve got a kid coming up in Gwinnett with pin-point control who’s re-animating the dramatic monologue, and they want to make room in the bullpen”?

Can you imagine a poetry culture where critics, instead of praising the newest latest of the popular and esteemed simply because it is the newest latest of the popular and esteemed actually says, “There’s nothing new here. Why should I or anybody read it? Are they even trying? Time for this poet to hang up their shoes.”

Imagine what might be happening in the culture of English in the U.S. if English departments embraced the philosophy, “How can our national culture outshine that of other nations if the writers of our literature are not first *scholars* of our literature?” (Seriously,

³⁹ No, I am not arguing from example. I think very few people would refuse those characterizations. Those books are masterworks; and those poems are damn good poems.

name another field where that is not *assumed*?)

Am I saying that English departments should only accept into their programs future Brownings and Eliots and Pounds and Zukofskys? Of course not. The very thought is absurd through and through. What I am saying is that that does not excuse the cultures of language (or art, for that matter) from striving to create a broad, social culture of *reading* that is sophisticated enough to read and more importantly *expect and demand* from its literary institutions *Patersons* and *Waste Lands*. For it is so very true that poetry – and literature – is so very important a thing: *because it is about language*, and so it is about how the individual sees the world; about how the individual engages the world; and about the development of their spiritual self as much as their cultural self.

Derrida’s preferred word was *desedimentation*, rather than *deconstruction*. It reveals by comparison the relative weakness of the latter term. Yes, the aesthetic project is an active project, and thus the structures of society must be actively “deconstructed.” But the true description, the true *narrative* lies in that other word, *desedimentation*: for it is not only a statement of action, but a statement that the inherent modality of any culture, of any society, is movement toward sedimentation, toward conventionality and dogmaticism, toward mediocrity as a norm and toward the suppression of the individual and of beauty as a necessary act of survival. In that, those who speak themselves as being concerned with language and beauty are thus called to the bar.

Ultimately, the placid satisfaction of the culture of poetry, in its unchallenging nomic mediocrity, concerns not just the poets, but also the readers of poetry, the readers of literature, indeed, the whole of the body of readers that constitute the greater national culture. Fussell also recognized this, and found the idea important enough that he closed off his book with it.

“The innocent eye sees nothing.” The unwitting reader finds poems “obscure.” It is the trained reader alone who fits himself for that great repeated act of complicity with the poet which is the source of the fullest delight and the fullest enlightenment; for the reader is an individual talent too,

and it is technical knowledge and command that release his own singular energies *and open for him his own liberating vision.*⁴⁰

There is nothing of merit in a culture of poetry, a culture of literature, that depends upon and promotes the modality of reading/writing like that demonstrated with “Spook House” and its defense, especially a culture that promotes and encourages such writing/reading within its own academia.

The primary failure of English departments and English teachers at whatever academic level is that of failing to teach students how to read for themselves; how to develop meaning and experience out of a text on their own, without appeal to external authorities; how to generate a valid engagement with a text, and how to engage then the readings of other people toward new readings of that text and the increase of their own sophistication and understanding of literature and of themselves; and how to have *confidence* in their own readings, irrespective of the authorities demanding otherwise – which is where the pedagogy of the aesthetic emerges.

In this lie my own emotional and intellectual energies, and the aesthetic/philosophical drive behind my projects in literature and the arts, including my PDC blog.

So here, at the end of this essay, I will permit myself a moment to some of those emotional energies. Here is my *j'accuse*. It lies in a fundamental understanding of the modalities of the nomic and the aesthetic that has been annunciated and demonstrated and proclaimed and analyzed within theory and literature and art and cultural studies and psychology in one form or another for the past three hundred years (last thriving previously in the time of the Renaissance, before the great nomic reassertion that was the Reformation). It is an understanding and a project embodied by the word *desedimentation*. The nomic is a *passive* modality of thought. Culture and society is not what is created, but what sediments, what

⁴⁰ 180, emphasis his.

concretizes into tradition, convention, and repetitive performance. The aesthetic, however, is and can *only* be an *active* modality of being. It demands action, effort, thought: thus its desedimentive modality, where any such action in the lake can not but stir up the silt and sediment.

In simplicity – and here again I return to the writer-oriented voice of my blog – it is only in the aesthetic modality of being that one can find true *creativity*, and it is only through the aesthetic modality of being that one can trace those higher natures of the human race. Any culture of poetry that permits itself to sediment into a nomic modality stands *irrefutably in opposition* to the very qualities related to those higher faculties of humankind it claims to uphold. The development of the self as an individual happens within language. It is through language that the creative imagination and the individual self finds sophistication. As such, literature, above all the other arts, is the vanguard of the development of the creativity, wisdom, and spirituality of any society. Poetry, in its claim to be literature in its highest form, thus has the obligation, the burden, and the *charge* of leading the point.

As such,

Poetry –

- should be challenging of the reader
- should demand that the reader think actively and creatively
- should be striving to expand the reader’s sophistication in language and thought through its own striving toward sophistication in language and thought
- should be creative, and in its creativity develop and urge and reward the creativity of the reader
- should make the reader look words up in a dictionary, and ideas up in encyclopedias and reference books
- should tap deeply into the literary and artistic heritage of its own society and of others
- should breathe, in its every inhale and exhale, the mythic
- should push other writers to strive

“#poppoetry” – A.E.M. Baumann
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- should accept that readers and writers are of different degrees and fields of sophistication, but should not accept that as permission ever to write down
- should know and emphasize that sophistication is an individual trait, and the only true praise of it is in its development
- should demonstrate in its every utterance the strive to brilliance, no matter what degree or nature of sophistication out of which comes the striving
- should understand, demonstrate, and teach that literary engagement lies in depth, not in surface; and that the individual can not be found in the cultural

So also with every poet. Writer. Artist. Being.

Any Defense of Poetry, any Poetics, any Book of Poetry, any Poem, any Poet that does not do the above is *by definition and nature* A FAILURE of the culture of poetry as an expression of the higher qualities of humankind, and A VICTORY for the reduction of the culture of poetry to little more than pop culture.

And there is no way around it.