How Transparent Should Poetry Be? **[1]**

November 13, 2017 Media Debate [2]
About Poetry [3]
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Essay by Steve Lewis

Leaving Babel Behind

Don't miss Neil de la Flor's response to this essay, "Do Poems Need to Be Accessible? [5]," and the TW poem under discussion: "A Thousand Bluebirds [6]."

The attractive, stylish, middle-aged poet, a newly minted MFA from Sarah Lawrence, looks coiffed and poised in this

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well-appointed Westchester, New York, living room. Sitting in a circle around her are a dozen or so equally stylish women in their forties and fifties, legs crossed, sipping wine, slim volumes of poetry on the coffee table before them.

This salon is the local book launch for the poet's first collection. Unlike almost all the people in this polite living room, I know the poet's work quite well—I was one of her writing mentors along the way—and I genuinely admire the effort and distinctive sensibility that have gone into each poem in the collection. But this evening, I find myself watching the audience as attentively as I am listening to the reading. I see the shaking feet, the pensive looks on their faces; I hear the occasional *hmmmm*.

She is a very good writer, but not an easy one to follow, and I wonder what this group of non-writers is hearing. I wonder if you need to be a writer to appreciate the associative, abstract, nonlinear flow of this poet's words. The recitation quickly follows a pattern: title, poem, polite applause, smiles, sips of wine, a pause, then a new title and the next poem.

After the fifth or sixth piece, however, the sister-in-law of the host, four wines in, blurts out, "I'm sorry, but I don't know what the hell you're talking about."

The air in the room instantly flatlines. Shaking feet still. Eyes open wide. It's as if we are all participants in a game of literary freeze tag. The host, blood draining from her face, looks as if she needs to be reminded to take a breath.

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In a 2011 blog interview, Steve Kowit was asked, "What is your proudest accomplishment/moment as a poet?" His answer: "I'm proudest of deciding fairly young, in my late twenties, to write a poetry that is totally accessible." I counted Steve among my cherished later-in-life friends—he passed away in 2015—and in that same interview, he added:

> Ginsberg and Jeffers convinced me that I really wanted to write a thoroughly transparent poetry in which clarity was a decided virtue. I confess that obscurity seems to me a dreadful flaw in poetry, and poets whose poems don't really mean much of anything are poets I simply don't bother reading. The notion of a poem being 'mysterious' is greatly misunderstood in our culture: it usually means a person who writes intriguing images and lines that are incomprehensible. That's not mystery; it's mystification. So I'm…writing against the American grain, wanting ordinary literate people to love my work.

I remembered Steve's call for transparency at that uncomfortable moment during the Westchester reading—and a few years later, I confronted it again in the pages of this magazine. I was home in my not-quite-so-well-appointed living room, drinking a glass of wine, reading an interesting collaborative poem in the Spring 2017 issue of *Talking Writing*: "A Thousand Bluebirds" by Maureen Seaton and Neil de la Flor. As I sometimes do, after reading and re-reading and re-reading a piece, I went to the Comments box and wrote to the poets, saying I admired their "deft touch in creating such a unique tension of layered voices, so lighthearted and deadly serious."

That's true. I like the poem's juxtaposition of opposing images to create that tension. But the underlying truth is that my opening was more throat-clearing than a reflection of what was on my mind then: To borrow the drunk sister-in-law's wording, I simply didn't know what the hell they were talking about. So, I added this in my comment:

> I don't think it is transparent enough to 'ordinary literate people'—and am wondering if you and any other readers of this magazine believe that kind of transparency is important—or not.

Was I surprised over the next week or two that neither poet responded to my questions? Honestly, no. There are many good reasons for silence, of course. When Maureen Seaton did comment later, for instance, I learned she'd been dealing with cancer treatment at the time.

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But in looking beyond this singular event, let me offer a previously unspoken observation about the writing life: I have rarely run across a poet who would deign to engage anyone on any topic that challenges his or her or their intent. From the polite but dismissive *the audience can only get what it can get*, all the way to the bolder *not my f-ing job to explain*, poets often construct self-protective walls around their poems. I can't help wondering if the disdain for poets and poetry in this country is connected to both the mind-boggling nature of the work itself and to the reticence of most writers to explain themselves.

And now I'm crossing into what Seamus Heaney called "the frontier of writing": driving on past the checkpoints ("past armor-plated vehicles, out between / the posted soldiers flowing and receding / like tree shadows into the polished windscreen") in order to explore why so many modern writers seem to lack the language, the generosity of spirit, or perhaps just the literary backbone to attempt to present—or just introduce—their work in a way that would respectfully invite non-writers into the conversation.

Why not present poetry in a more transparent way for general readers—to help them appreciate the work or even add dimension to it? I suspect (actually I know, as I see it in myself) that this kind of withholding or reticence is true of all artists, but it seems particularly egregious when it involves those of us who use language as our tools.

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I am not evangelizing for easy-to-understand poetry. That's television. *Highlights Magazine*. *People*. Hallmark cards. Rod McKuen. And I think Emily Dickinson's advice to "Tell all the truth but tell it slant—" is far too self-conscious and manipulative to be of use to poets aiming for something bigger than pop psychology.

I like—even admire—a lot of poems I don't fully understand. The first time I read Robert Creeley's "The Memory," I loved it. I had no idea who Priscilla was or what the hell a "feminine Benjamin" might be. It didn't matter, though. With his title and first line ("Like a river she was"), Creeley gave me enough of a footing in the real world to get me on board before soaring off into abstraction where the real stuff is happening.

And it was first through Creeley—and then Denise Levertov, Robert Bly, Nikki Giovanni, and others—that I came to understand that for me the most powerful, resonant poetry is like cool jazz. (Poetry and jazz are explicitly linked in the musical accompaniment to Creeley's reading of "The Memory" on his record *Really!!*.) Jazz songs often begin with a story—the accessible, even clichéd, core narrative of John Coltrane's "My Favorite Things" or Miles Davis's "My Funny Valentine"—and then transport listeners out beyond the bounds of the illusions of everyday experience and into the realm of what I'm insufficiently calling larger truths.

Which brings me, as good jazz and good poetry do, to what I have come to understand is a guiding axiom in my work: the story, or better still the accessible story, is never *the* story—it is just a vehicle to get to the real story. That primary narrative is not meant to be more than an entertainment of some sort, a come-on, a flirtation, a wink. But it's also an essential conveyance for transporting readers into the wilderness, where a richer, far more complicated and elusive reality exists.

Without that primary story inviting the writer and non-writer into the frontier, the result is a phrase I occasionally hear in writing workshops: *inside baseball*. Understanding is limited to those few in the know. There's a difference between *inside baseball* and *inside poetry*, though: With baseball, millions and millions of people are in the know. With poetry, only a smattering of folks across the country understand the language, and I'm sorry to say that doesn't include many academics. They may claim to be in the know but too often approach poetry—all literature, for that matter—as Sunday crossword puzzles to be solved, not as gateways to experiencing the deepest and truest levels of existence.

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Let's go back to that tony Westchester living room for a moment.

After that oxygen-sucking remark by the drunk sister-in-law, the poet graciously and gracefully began to introduce each of her poems with the stories that preceded and inspired them. With that gesture alone, her associative poetry became

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more accessible to this non-writing audience. It became a vehicle driving them out beyond the boundaries of their suburban enclave and into the primeval forest of shared human experience. (I can't speak for the drunk sister-in-law.)

And so I left the salon that night with a burgeoning appreciation for the art of offering art to an all-too-often artless world. I drove back home to the mountains, to the wilderness of my internal life, mile after mile, pondering whether abstract or associative poems nakedly on the page or starkly presented in person, without any narrative introduction or explanation, can possibly do the work they need to do to reach a listener's inner ear.

Must any poem of enduring value be first driven by an accessible narrative that establishes some contact with the earth—just as my tires rumbling over the concrete were transporting me to a different landscape, another dimension of reality?

How transparent should poetry be?

Frankly, I still don't know. I continue to ponder the magic of language, even as I grow more certain that many of us writers owe readers more than we're willing to offer or risk. Years after that living room salon, I'm casting my lot with Steve Kowit (Ginsberg and Jeffers, Bass and Olds, Collins and Dove, Rumi and Li-Young Lee, among so many others). And from some unmapped location on the frontier where poetry informs the soul, I'm calling back to my traveling companions with a familiar plaintive wail: *I'm lost! I don't know what the hell you're talking about. Please find me and explain.*

Publishing Information

- "Email Interview: Poet Steve Kowit [7]" by Leigh A. Pollack, *Basic Operation Guide*, May 11, 2011.
- "From the Frontier of Writing [8]" by Seamus Heaney in *The Haw Lantern* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1987).
- "The Memory [9]" by Robert Creeley from Really!! *[10]* (Paris Records, 1988).

Art Information

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Steven Lewis is a columnist at *Talking Writing*, Literary Ombudsman for *read650.com*, a former mentor at Empire State College, a current member of the Sarah Lawrence College Writing Institute faculty, and a longtime freelancer. His work has been published widely, from the notable to obscure, including in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Ploughshares*, *Narratively*, and *Spirituality and Health*.

His books include *Zen and the Art of Fatherhood*; *Fear and Loathing of Boca Raton*; *If I Die Before You Wake* (poetry); a novel, *Take This*; and a generational sequel, *Loving Violet* [11], recently published by Codhill Press.

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