

The Unsayable Said

Donald Hall

1

Poems are pleasure first, bodily pleasure, a deliciousness of the senses. Mostly, poems end by saying something (even the unsayable) but they start as the body's joy, like making love. Sometimes a poem remains a small pleasing sensation:

Bah, bah, black sheep,
Have you any wool?
Yes, sir. Yes, sir.
Three bags full.

Maybe these words once referred to taxation, but we hear them now without being tempted to paraphrase. Instead, we chew on them, taste them, and dance to them. This banquet or ballet starts in the crib, before arithmetic or thought. Everyone was once an infant who took mouth pleasure in gurgle and shriek, accompanied by musclejoy as our small limbs clenched and unclenched. Poetry starts from the crib; a thousand years later, John Donne makes lovers into compasses, T. S. Eliot contemplates the still point of the turning world, and Elizabeth Bishop remembers sitting as a child in the dentist's waiting room; but if these poets did not retain the mouth pleasure of a baby's autistic utterance—pleasure in vowels on the tongue, pleasure in changes of volume and pause: Bah, bah, black sheep—we would not hear their meditations and urgencies.

The body is poetry's door; the sounds of words—throbbing in legs and arms; rich in the mouth—let us into the house.

Styles of architecture: In his spiritual grammar, Walt Whitman often wrote long complex sentences: The first sentence of "Out of the Cradle" is two hundred and eight words, arranged into twenty two lines so that its subject, verb, and object wait until the last three lines. But the same poet could make a poem both brief and simple: This is "A Farm Picture" — all of it:

Through the ample open door of the peaceful country barn,
A sunlit pasture field with cattle and horses fading,
And haze and vista, and the far horizon fading away.

The Unsayable Said

Donald Hall

2

It's merely a picture, an incomplete sentence—yet if we read it with an appropriate slow sensuous attentiveness, these lines fill us with a luminous beauty. The reader's mouth dwells in luxury on the three long ays of the last line, but pleasure does not reside only in the mouth: Feel the balance in the first two lines— three and three, three and three — then the slight variation in the last line, with "haze and vista" and "far horizon fading away." The mouth lolls among diphthongs like a sunbather.

Readers who enjoy this small poem don't think about its balances and variations; we feel them, the way we feel a musical theme that returns slightly altered: expectation fulfilled and denied. With this poem as with the blacksheep, we don't paraphrase; we take "A Farm Picture" for what it calls itself. But if we notice that the poem first appeared as the Civil War ended in 1865, we may find the word "peaceful" emphatic. We speculate; speculation does no harm when it acknowledges itself. What the reader must not do (and what the classroom often encourages): We must never assume that the poem, appearing simple, hides an intellectual statement that only professors are equipped to explicate.

Yet, it's true: When we read poems we often feel more emotion than we can reasonably account for. If this little poem pleases us much, it pleases us more than paraphrase can explain. (To paraphrase this poem we are driven to synonyms—"Through the wide unclosed portal"—which serve only to show that synonyms do not exist.) Feeling bodily pleasure and fulfillment, feeling rightness beyond reason, feeling contentment or even bliss — we can not account for the extremity of our satisfaction. By its art of saying the unsayable, poetry produces a response in excess of the discernible stimulus.

Pursuing the architectural analogy, I want to call this response the secret room. Friends of ours bought an old house in the country, a warren of small rooms, and after they furnished it and settled down, they became aware that their floor plan made no sense. Peeling off some wallpaper they found a door that pried open to reveal a tiny room, sealed off and hidden, goodness knows why: They found no corpses nor stolen goods. The unsayable builds a secret room, in the best poems, which shows in the excess of feeling over paraphrase. This room is not a Hidden Meaning, to be paraphrased by the intellect; it conceals itself from reasonable explanation. The secret room is something to acknowledge, accept, and honor in

The Unsayable Said

Donald Hall

3

a silence of assent; the secret room is where the unsayable gathers, and it is poetry's uniqueness.

POETS are literal minded, and poetry depends, even when it names marvelous and impossible things, on a literal mind. On the other hand, the conventional intellect wants to translate particulars into abstractions, as if images were allegorical; this translation is the grave error of the philosophers. The unsayable speaks only through the untranslated image and its noises. When we read Blake's "O Rose, thou art sick!" it is useless to ask: "What does Rose mean? What does sick mean?" Good readers imagine a rose and entertain notions of illness, possibly beginning with a plantcanker and continuing to a blossom on a breathing tube, or — more historically — petals bled by leeches. When Emily Dickinson writes that "Death. . . kindly stopped for me," we listen to a story in which a horse and carriage — the figure of mortality holding the reins—pause to pick up a walker. Thomas Hardy, wandering as an old man in a graveyard, speculates on the vegetation growing from graves: Parts of a yew tree must be somebody his grand father knew, because the yew grows from the burial place. Wandering further he sees a bush by the grave of a girl he knew when he was a young man:

And the fair girl long ago
Whom I often tried to know
May be entering this rose.

Here we have two kinds of literalness: Hardy speculates on molecular survival, particles of the girl's body turned into botanical nutrients; but take the lines into the imagination, and we watch her molecules enter the rose as a living woman might walk through the portals of a church. The poetry, saying the unsayable, resides in the two ways of seeing or understanding brought (impossibly) together.

AN Y T H I N G that can be thoroughly said in prose might as well be said in prose. The everyday intellect remains satisfied with abstraction and prose; the poetic mentality wants more. In narrative poems, the poetry adds the secret (unsayable) room of feeling and tone to the sayable story. Philosophy in its more logical incarnations strives to eliminate powers of association because they are subjective and uncontrollable. Poetry, on the other hand, wants to address the whole matter of the human—including fact and logic, but also the body with its senses, and above all the harsh complexities of emotion. Our senses, excited by sound and picture, assimilate records of feeling that are also passages to feeling.

The Unsayable Said

Donald Hall

4

Poems tell stories; poems recount ideas; but poems embody feeling. Because emotion is illogical — in logic opposites cannot both be true; in the life of feeling, we love and hate together— the poem exists to say the unsayable. Contradictory reality, represented in language, depends on nice distinctions. If Hardy told us that the fair girl "Might be marching into this cactus," his associations would have failed him— and we would not read his poem. Marianne Moore finds poetry in definition:

Nor was he insincere in saying, 'Make my house your inn.'
Inns are not residences.

Sometimes definitions, plain in talk, combine logical impossibility with ironic witness, as in Geoffrey Hill:

 this is a raging solitude of desire,
 this is the chorus of obscene consent,
 this is the single voice of perfect praise.

Poems embody the coexistence of opposites that together form an identity; the Roman poet Catullus wrote *Odi et amo* "I hate and I love."

We come to poetry for the pleasure of its body and for the accuracy and confirmation of its feeling. When I grieve I go to poems that grieve; I touch the feelings of a seventeenth century bishop who writes about the death of his bride; or, reading a translation of the world's oldest poem, I wail with Gilgamesh over the death of his blood brother Enkidu. In a modern adaptation from the Sumerian epic (3000 B.C.), the King of Uruk howls, "Nowhere can I lay my head down to rest or to sleep! / What happened to mybrother will happen to me!"

Mostly we read poetry for the love of it, not in search of consolation. In the act of reading, we exercise or practice emotion, griefs and joys, erotic transport and the anguish of loss — as if poems were academies of feeling, as if in reading poems we practiced emotion and understandings of emotion. Poetry by its bodily, mental, and emotional complex educates the sensibility, thinking and feeling appropriately melded together.

Words are to poems as stone to the stone carving sculptor. When we say that we are parking the car we use the material of poetry; we do not speak it, any more

The Unsayable Said

Donald Hall

5

than the contractor, spreading the parking lot's gravel, makes sculpture. Poetry is the only art that uses as its material some thing that everyone practices—and this commonness is both a strength of poetry and an impediment to reading it. Poetry is not talk. It sounds like talk— at least from Wordsworth on, or from Dante, commonplace asserts that speech is our material — but poetry is talk altered into art, speech slowed down and attended to, words arranged for the reader who contracts to read them for their whole heft of association and noise. If we try reading poetry with our

eyes, as we learn to read newspapers, we miss its bodiliness as well as the history bodied into its words. Reading with care, so that a wholeness of language engages a wholeness of reading body and mind, we absorb poetry not with our eyes only nor with our ears at a reading: We read with our mouths that chew on vowel and consonant; we read with our limbed muscles that enact the dance of the poem's rhythm; we read alert to the history and context of words. Robert Creeley's poem ends:

Be for me, like rain,
the getting out

of the tiredness, the fatuousness, the semi-
lust of international indifference.

Be wet
with a decent happiness.

When we read these lines with the slow attention we give
Whitman or Hill, this rain sinks in.

All of us can ask directions or remark that it looks like snow. When we wish to embody in language a complex of feelings or sensations or ideas, we fall into inarticulateness; attempting to speak, in the heat of love or argument, we say nothing or we say what we do not intend. Poets encounter inarticulateness as much as anybody, or maybe more: They are aware of the word's inadequacy because they spend their lives struggling to say the unsayable. From time to time, in decades of devotion to their art, poets succeed in defeating the enemies of ignorance, deceit, and ugliness. The poets we honor most are those who—by studious imagination, by continuous connection to the sensuous body, and by spirit steeped in the practice and learning of language — publish in their work the unsayable said.

