COMMENT

AMBITION AND GREATNESS: AN EXCHANGE

ADAM KIRSCH:

A famous anecdote has it that when W. H. Auden was a student at Oxford, his tutor asked him what career he planned to pursue. He explained that he wanted to be a poet, and was met with the kind of patronizing smile all poets know so well. "You don't understand," Auden retorted, "I mean to be a *great* poet."

One way of approaching our discussion of greatness and ambition in poetry is to ask whether any young poet today, similarly patronized, would risk Auden's reply. And it *is* a risk, in at least two ways. The first is the one that ambitious poets have always faced: the risk of failure, of simply not being good enough. For real greatness is exceedingly rare in any poetic generation—much rarer than the polite hyperbole of critical discourse allows us to admit.

It seems to me that this risk looms larger for young poets today than it did in the past, for reasons that are mostly sociological. The initial ambition to write poetry must always be a private matter, a yearning and striving of the soul; but very soon, as early as the undergraduate years, this yearning can be regulated, confused, and replaced by the bureaucratic ambition to attain a secure place in the profession of poetry. Under these conditions, it takes an unusual writer to lay on him or herself the rigorous, self-mistrusting, finally unsatisfiable demand for greatness.

But today, we also run a second risk, a more important and interesting one, when we invoke the ideal of greatness. If we look at poets of our day who seem likely to earn and sustain the name of great—I would think right away of Derek Walcott and the late Czeslaw Milosz—it is obvious that even the great poets are no longer interested in greatness, at least not in the sense that Milton or Keats were. After the world wars, communism, and fascism, there is a drastic mistrust in all intellectual fields of naive, triumphal humanism, of universal claims that disguise personal interests and assumptions. For a poet like Milosz, greatness consists not in self-assertion but in self-abnegation, not in mastery but in witnessing. This is a more modest and self-suspicious ideal, which may recoil from the very name of greatness, even as it retains the old ambition that defines the word—in Milton's formula, to create something that time will not willingly let die.

DAISY FRIED:

I too like to guess which contemporaries will turn out to be capital-G Great. It's a fun game I play while sitting around with my friends crabbing about the State of American Poetry. Alan Dugan and Thylias Moss are two of my current candidates. Of course I'm sure I'm right about them—and know my picks mostly display my taste, and what I think is useful to my own writing.

But risk aversion isn't enough to explain why younger poets are unlikely to make Auden's retort. There's a political reason. Mid-century criticism staked a lot on distinction-making: what was good, or great, or "flawed." But liberal/left/anti-imperial/feminist politics made that seem a way of keeping the gates to greatness closed to almost everyone but white male writers. Opening the gates meant reconsidering, not denying, greatness. "Flawed" began to mean "human."

A total networker careerist can be a great or lousy poet. So can a hermit in a cave. Feeble poetic ambition probably starts before careers begin. Beginning poets aren't, I think, cynical in their stylistic choices. If anything they're too earnestly docile. Young poets probably shouldn't aim explicitly for greatness. Life is stressful enough without that kind of pressure. But when the only aim is getting an A+ in reproducing teachers' revolutions, it's unlikely to lead anywhere but mediocrity.

We tend to think of old-style poetic ambition as sober confrontation of Big Topics. But alongside Walcott and Milosz, I'll mention their contemporary Frank O'Hara. His resolutely anti-grandiose poems—full of trivia, though not trivial; serious, but never serious-minded; full of death, love/sex, politics ("Khrushchev is coming on the right day!")—oppose in tone and treatment the Mega-statement of the Greatness Sweepstakes Grab. What makes O'Hara great—and Great—is humor, self-mockery, fooling around. One of the delights of contemporary poetry is that there are as many ways of being great as there are of being ambitious.

I'm not arguing against making distinctions. I like saying what I like and loathe. I'll say why I think any poet is good or bad. I'm not particularly interested in persuading anyone to agree with me; it's hard enough getting people to like my own poems. When I read I don't ask myself, "Is this great?" I look to see if something interesting is going on, hopefully something I don't quite understand, something I need to figure out. Is that looking for ambition?

THOMAS SAYERS ELLIS:

I am not even sure what is truly useful to my writing anymore, and I am more than suspicious about all things capital-G Great, although I know there must be (buried deep down inside of me) a set of criteria for making such distinctions. And where did I acquire these criteria—in classrooms, anthologies, workshops, magazines, readings, and bookstores? Or was it always a part of the little false democracy within me?

Having grown up in Washington, DC, where everything is capitol and capital, I am now more drawn to inner celebrations of the kind of greatness and aesthetic practices that seemingly lack ambition. In this regard, I agree with Adam about Walcott and Milosz. I also like how their greatness fiercely resists being copied. Above and below all else, the determining, central, invisible-made-visible energy that makes them great is the quality of their human imagination. And this is the thing that, unlike subject matter, style, and vocabulary, is most recognizable every time we read them.

I prefer this brand of greatness, the production of an almost ego-less imagination. Daisy's so right about O'Hara's humor, which, for me, has to do with what his tongue saw and how his eyes sang, and how he painted the Big Topics back into the little topics where they belong. (Two other living favorites are Aimé Césaire and Amiri Baraka.) On the other hand, there are some living poets whose every other line or title is an attempt to toss the poem into the arena of Greatness or onto the great canonical track. Mostly such poems feel like marble, the overrated brain outworking the underpaid heart. There is a sense in which ambition—or Ambition—damages the work of these poets at the basic level of diction and metaphor—especially in terms of class and cultural references. It seems to me that there are Pulitzer words and forms, even

Nobel words and forms. The sad thing I am trying to say is that often greatness and ambition backfire and get used to splinter and fragment true community and creativity.

JEREDITH MERRIN:

So here we are, with "greatness" thrust upon us—quickly passing around that postmodern hot coal. Untenable universal claims; oppressive class-race-gender hierarchies; canonical impositions; pomposities and careerist jostlings: these contemporary concerns surrounding the notion of literary "greatness" rightly have been raised. Here are two or three of the questions that, for me, emerge from our discussion so far:

Is "great" large? Adam mentions Milosz's "more modest and self-suspicious ideal"; Daisy celebrates "anti-grandiose" fooling around; and Thomas likes O'Hara for "how he painted the Big Topics back into little topics where they belong." I am reminded of a moment in a video on Elizabeth Bishop when her old classmate Mary McCarthy remarks, "All her greatness was in smallness." No living American, of course, writes with Bishop's quickening combination of freshness and minute exactness—or with her slyly veiled and partially self-thwarted ambition to map both inner and outer worlds. But might her current, more-or-less uncontested elevation in a range of American poetry circles also signal a general unease with largeness? As a contemporary preference, are we trying to rewrite "great" as small?

Is smallness, after all, so great? It seems to me that lesser and less ambitious poets than Bishop (whom I love and admire, but am not sure I'd call "great") are, in their race to become professionally ensconced, taking up projects of attenuated ambition and scope. When we have a bureaucracy of poetry in which rushed, small efforts are routinely promoted and puffed, aren't the odds decreased for the recognition of genuinely bold and humanly important new work? What we need is not the making of the career *poet*, but of the unique and long-lived *poems*—in Einstein's words, "the unloseable friends"—that continue to offer something a reader can turn to: in playfulness, but also in pensiveness or perplexity, in joy or grief or rage. Yehuda Amichai might qualify as a composer of poems meeting this description, as might Auden; so, perhaps, might Philip Larkin.

And what about Milosz?—so far our most agreed-upon candidate for contemporary greatness, whose "Incantation" was circulated throughout the e-world (as were poems by Auden and Marianne Moore) when heartbroken people reached for the right words after 9/11. Self-suspicious (and other-suspicious) as Milosz was, his short/large poem takes on nothing less than the wish for a humanist reclamation of humanly debased reality. It even evokes capital-T Truth! And it was Milosz in *The Land of Ulro* who wrote, apropos our discussion:

> But behind the vanity contest, behind all the comedy (of the weak judging the weak) and sheer ordinary folly, the longing for greatness, however misguided, must be acknowledged.

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ADAM KIRSCH:

I'm glad that our discussion has brought up two poets who usefully test what we mean by greatness, Frank O'Hara and Elizabeth Bishop. Good and enduring as they are, I would agree with Jeredith that there is something not quite right about calling them great, in the sense that Eliot and Whitman and Dickinson are great. And the reluctance to make that distinction, motivated though it may be by virtuous political or personal reasons, seems to me finally a mistake. There is a hierarchy of achievement in poetry, as in all the arts; denying it doesn't make it disappear, it only blunts and veils our aesthetic responses.

Hierarchy—or, better, judgment—becomes a problem only when we use it to make the great the enemy of the good. No sensible reader would deny him or herself the genuine pleasure offered by O'Hara, or the deeper and rarer delight offered by Bishop, simply because other poets are capable of being still more moving and profound. More to the point of our discussion, it is always a mistake for a poet to try to sound "great" in the particular ways authorized by the past. That only produces inert solemnity, whereas true seriousness is always surprising. This is what Eliot meant when he wrote, in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," that "to conform merely [to the standards of the past] would be for the new work not really to conform at all; it would not be new, and would therefore not be a work of art." When Daisy protests "Big Topics," and Thomas "Nobel words," it seems to me that it is this sort of conformity that they have in mind.

Does "great" have any determinate meaning, then, or is it just what we call whatever we happen to like very much? I think it does have a meaning, and a use, because it names a particular quality in certain poems and poets that we genuinely feel when reading them. It is the quality Matthew Arnold named "the grand style," which arises "when a noble nature, poetically gifted, treats with simplicity or with severity a serious subject." As long as we give those words—noble, gifted, severe, serious—the intelligent, supple definition they require, I doubt if Arnold's definition can be bettered.

DAISY FRIED:

Puffery and careerism aren't twentieth-century inventions; bad poetry doesn't chase out good. If it did, poetry would have died long ago. Possibly, good poetry needs bad poetry in order to exist.

I'm not sure I'm in the "we" that agrees on Milosz. I don't think Bishop is "deeper" and "rarer" than O'Hara. I prefer Williams to Adam's Eliot. Proving . . . nothing. What's the use of saying Bishop's not as great as Dickinson? There's no judgment day for poets, where Shakespeare gets to sit at God's right hand, O'Hara only gets to the second heavenly circle, most of us drop down to purgatory, and X (name omitted because I'm chicken; you *know* who I mean) gets tossed into hell. (Circle of the neutrals? False counselors? The violent against nature and art?)

Adam, does "noble . . . simplicity . . . severity . . . serious" really describe, say, "Prufrock," or is "Prufrock" written to undercut all that? What could be less noble or more great than Pope's "Arbuthnot" or his scurrilous "Dunciad"? Byron's *Don Juan* and Tennyson's *In Memoriam*: two long, great nineteenth-century poems. But only the latter fits Arnold's definition, sort of.

If anything blunts aesthetic response, it's when poetry is burdened with irrelevant requirements. Jeredith, you talk of "turning to" certain poets. I can't imagine "turning to" that misanthropist, reactionary shit, one of my favorite poets, Philip Larkin, "in playfulness . . . pensiveness . . . perplexity . . .

joy . . . grief . . . rage." Larkin, who can't even say something uplifting like "What will survive of us is love" without undercutting the statement in the previous line!

The poetry-as-solace mafia, a subset of the poetry-is-wisdom syndicate, would have it that poetry is anything but, simply, art as language. So many people claim poetry solaces them that it must be true. But so do sex, wine, wasabi peas, Italian *Vogue*, shopping, and Pilates. And, obviously, bad poetry works as well as good. I'm glad nobody sent me a Marianne Moore poem for post-9/11 solace; I'd probably have torn my computer out of the wall and thrown it through the window. If people were "turning to" Moore to feel better after the terrible trauma of watching the towers fall *on TV*, they weren't reading Moore as Moore. Which poem was it? "The Steeple-Jack," because it talks about hope? Great poem, great poet, but reading "The Steeple-Jack" for solace or message is like looking at a Raphael Madonna for Christian doctrine. The more we require poetry to be anything other than poetry, the less ambitious we are for it to be great.

Sorry to sound cranky. All I mean to say is: No No No No No No No!

THOMAS SAYERS ELLIS:

I'm glad someone said "shit" in the less-than-grand style just to keep it real. If we were walking down the street, let's say Florida Avenue in Washington, DC, and one of Matthew Arnold's boys whipped out that grand style definition with "noble nature" in it, he'd get the same black footprint on his chest that Bruce Lee instructed Kareem Abdul-Jabbar to give him in *The Game of Death*, and then we would chase him back to his suburban cliffs for committing the first crime of elitism: narrow defining. The "small things" in my statement about O'Hara were not a call for small subjects, but an attempt to put on equal footing "great poetry" (as determined by the written/published) and "folk poetry" (as determined by its speakers/unpublished). O'Hara's smart balancing act of these forms was just beginning when he was killed. The straight-up, down-to-earth problem with Arnold's comment is that it doesn't allow for an approaching of the grand style by anyone other that a decided "noble." *Them*, again, etcetera. In defense of all that is not academic, ambitious, or grand, I quote Walt Whitman:

> Language, be it remember'd, is not an abstract construction of the learn'd, or of dictionary-makers, but is something arising out of the work, needs, ties, joys, affections, tastes, of long generations of humanity, and has its bases broad and low, close to the ground. Its final decisions are made by the masses, people nearest the concrete, having most to do with actual land and sea.

The grand style, then, should (it would seem) beat back narrow grandness. But I know what Arnold meant, and the only grand style I can stomach these days is Derek Walcott's, because his work is almost always about repairing the divisions between his *landed* and *languaged* self. O'Hara and Bishop didn't make it all the way back to folk poetry, in my opinion, although Bishop's book-length children's poem *The Ballad of the Burglar of Babylon* de-formalizes an often trapped form. Gwendolyn Brooks, on the other hand, did make it home (all the way), and that effort is unique alongside other traditional ways of being "ambitious." Her work does much toward repairing the so-called grand style with clarity, creativity, and a playful fierceness. Hear the final ride of "Winnie" from this very magazine, the 75th Anniversary Issue (October-November, 1987):

> Listen, my Sisters, Brothers, all ye
> that dance on the brink of Blackness,
> never falling in:
> your vision your Code your Winnie is woman grown.
>
> I Nelson the Mandela tell you so.

She is my greatness.

JEREDITH MERRIN:

One benighted application of "great," of course, would be to praise poems thought to reinforce "the right values"—literature used to bolster complacencies, on the left or on the right. That sort of non-thinking can flatten George Herbert's "The Pulley" and a commercial feel-good verse into (as the student in this true story proposed) "pretty much the same poem"—Herbert's art and struggle ignored.

Which leads me to our second assigned abstraction, *Ambition*. (Hah! "Go in fear of abstractions"—yet we signed on.) Ambition Of The Largest Sort, for me, is tied up with non-complacency, with the willingness—or even eagerness—to entertain doubt. By "doubt" I mean the awareness that realities are many-angled, not easily summarized. Doubt is the Mother of Beauty. Ambitious poems (say, Bishop's "Crusoe," Moore's "What Are Years?" or Amichai's "Jerusalem, 1967") tend to see things from more than one perspective, to be of—at least—two minds.

Ambition O.T.L.S., in my book, also means ambition to include/say *new* things about the known and coming-to-be-known world. Think of the shrewdly observed panorama of Chaucer; of Donne's Age-of-Discovery avidities; of early to mid-Auden's skeptical command of contemporary culture, as well as his comprehension of subconscious depths (too often denied these days) in "In Praise of Limestone" and "In Memory of Sigmund Freud." And if poets bring, as Williams said, "the news," what about the news of the universe that's coming in daily? Is a writer in some sense disabled who doesn't know the nouns "instar," "quark," "reflection nebulae"—or about the limited number of Forces? After all, this *is* reality, in which our stories take place, not some theoretical postulate. As physicist Richard Feynman said, "It does not do harm to the mystery to know a little about it. . . . Why do the poets of the present not speak of it? What men [or women] are poets who can speak of Jupiter if he were a man, but if he is an immense spinning sphere of methane and ammonia must be silent?"

This isn't merely a matter of vocabulary: dramatic changes in our understanding of physical reality mean shifts in our ethical and emotional relationships to the world. Ambitious new work need not be "about" physics, of course; and the juice of poetry remains in the homely details—Williams's woman munching her plums. But writers stuck in Romantic or even twentieth-century assumptions can't do the present job. Poetry (to allude to Frost) stays vital, necessary, "great," by giving accurate accounts of the altering weather—both "inner" and "outer."