PURDUE UNIVERSITY

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture
ISSN 1481-4374
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Volume 9 (2007) Issue 1 Article 6

A Monk's Tale

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Port Townsend

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Recommended Citation

Hamill, Sam. "A Monk's Tale." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 9.1 (2007): <http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1017>

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ISSN 1481-4374 <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>
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Volume 9 Issue 1 (March 2007) Article 6
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<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol9/iss1/6>

Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 9.1 (2007)
Thematic Issue *Representing Humanity in an Age of Terror*
Edited by Sophia A. McClennen and Henry James Morello
<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol9/iss1/>

Abstract: In his paper, "A Monk's Tale," Sam Hamill recounts his ongoing commitment to using poetry as a form of protest and explains how poetry bridges the personal and the public, weaving together the life of one poet and that of an entire globe. In late January 2003, in response to an invitation to a symposium by Laura Bush to celebrate "Poetry and the American Voice," Hamill declined to participate; a longtime pacifist, he could not in good faith visit the White House following the recent news of George W. Bush's plan for a unilateral "Shock and Awe" attack on Iraq. Instead, he asked about fifty fellow poets to "reconstitute a Poets Against the War movement like the one organized to speak out against the war in Vietnam ... to speak up for the conscience of our country and lend your names to our petition against this war" by submitting poems of protest he would send to the White House. When 1,500 poets responded within four days, he created the website *Poets Against War* <http://www.poetsagainstwar.org> as a means of handling the enormous, unexpected response.

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Thematic Issue, *Representing Humanity in an Age of Terror*. Ed. Sophia A. McClennen and Henry James Morello

Sam HAMILL

A Monk's Tale

When I extracted the envelope from my post office box that crisp, clear January morning, I knew immediately what it was. The cream-colored square envelope had gold capital letters in the upper left-hand corner: THE WHITE HOUSE. I knew Laura Bush had sponsored several evenings with writers in her promotion of literacy. Clearly, there was going to be a poetry event, and equally clearly, I had been placed on the list. There could be no other possibilities. I didn't open it. I put it with other mail and returned to Copper Canyon Press, where I was in the midst of printing a broadside on my platen press. I felt intense stress, not joy. There was no way I could accept an invitation to George Bush's White House. I felt a little nauseous as I realized the situation into which I had been thrust. I couldn't simply act on my own, by my own conscience, because my actions would reflect, like it or not, fair or not, on Copper Canyon Press. I was going to have to look deeply into my own conscience and the practices of a lifetime as a socially engaged poet.

The night before, I had been exploring "shock and awe" on the internet, reading various stories about Bush's plans to devastate Iraq with an intense and intensifying missile barrage, a weak nation of beleaguered people who had no relationship to the al Qaeda attack on the U.S. When I completed my four-year enlistment in the Marine Corps, I exited as a Conscientious Objector. I was born during WW II, grew up during Korea and the McCarthy era, and came of age under Kennedy while serving for a couple of years in Japan. My first public poetry readings were under the auspices of Vietnam Veterans Against the War, Poets Against the War (in Vietnam), and part of my campaigning for Eugene McCarthy in 1968. I ran for California State Assembly that year as a socialist and devoted a lot of time to campaigning for McCarthy.

I had undergone infantry training at Camp Pendleton in Southern California, home of Camp Smedley D. Butler, named after the Marine Corps major general who won two Medals of Honor. This is what the good general had to say about serving his country: "I've spent 33 years being a high-class muscle man for big business, for Wall Street and the bankers. In short, I was a racketeer for capitalism ... I helped purify Nicaragua for the International Banking House of Brown Brothers in 1909-12. I helped make Mexico and especially Tampico safe for American Oil interests in 1914. I helped in the rape of half a dozen Central American Republics for the benefit of Wall Street. I was rewarded by honors, medals, promotions." And Henry Kissinger has a Nobel Peace Prize that sticks in the craw of every democratic Chilean.

For forty years I'd been a socially engaged antiwar poet. I was engaged in the civil rights campaigns of the sixties, supported feminist issues of the seventies, and had, in fact, been a devoted nonviolent revolutionary my entire adult life. And now I was being invited to the White House, where plans were well under way to sell our nation a pack of lies and fears, and an innocent nation-the very cradle of civilization-would be destroyed, our Constitution undermined, and all the worldwide sympathy and compassion extended toward us since the September 11 attack would evaporate. Several human rights organizations already claimed that a million Iraqis had died for lack of necessities under the embargo; hundreds of thousands more could die in an American shock-and-awe attack.

For an hour or so, I worked in the print room, mind reeling. But I couldn't focus. Finally, I opened the envelope. I was invited by Laura Bush to a symposium on "Poetry and *the* American Voice" (my emphasis). That "the" kind of caught my eye. There was no mention of which poets would be featured, only that the symposium would be held on February 12, 2003, three weeks away. I closed up shop and went home. I e-mailed the Copper Canyon Press board of directors. Most responded by prompting me to go. (Few of those people knew me at all well.) I knew in my heart that I could not in all conscience go play nice with people who sponsor murder-and firing missiles at cities is murder, period.

I felt my country was about to embark on a road to international disaster. I thought about poets I admired who'd found the courage to be Conscientious Objectors during World War II, people like Kenneth Rexroth, Bill Stafford, William Everson, Robert Lowell. How much venom they must have withstood for being true to their consciences. Mind still reeling, I went out to my library and pulled out Whitman-always, to my mind, "the most American poet." The Whitman who "contains multitudes." I kept thinking, oddly, about "the" American voice. I'd been saying for years that the multitudinous, broadly diverse voices of poetry in the U.S. had made this the richest time for poetry since the T'ang dynasty. Any poet who isn't in possession of a distinct voice isn't, frankly, much of a poet. There's not yet one American English language, but a tree of language with many beautiful branches-dialects, folk terminology, foreign words and phrases constantly enriching our tongue.

I've always admired Whitman's profound optimism. I don't share it, but I admire it. It served him well. But how far is our nation from the democratic vistas Whitman dreamed for us? We have the power to blow up the world many times over, and yet we are clearly incapable of running an election in which votes get properly counted. We are incapable of running an election that is not bought and paid for by corporate conglomerates that reduce grave issues to petulant sound bites, catch phrases, and outright lies. After writing some deeply moving poems in honor of the military, Whitman later wrote: "Away with themes of War, away with War itself! / Hence from my shuddering sight, to never more return, that show / of blacken'd mutilated corpses! / That hell unpent, and raid of blood—fit for wild tigers or for / lop-tongued wolves -- not reasoning men! / And in its stead speed Industry's campaigns! / With thy undaunted armies, Engineering! / The pennants, Labor, loosen'd to the breeze! / Thy bugles sounding loud and clear! / Rounding by thee in One—one common orbic language, / One common indivisible destiny and Union." Well, we certainly have "Industry's campaigns," and armies of "Engineering" will doubtless prosper as they begin to rebuild a devastated country. We do not live in Whitman's Utopia. We live in a time in which the odor of half-burnt corpses cannot shame us, the blood of our missiles does not stain us, in which even the caskets of those who serve their country are concealed. The Gulf War was a television event far removed from most Americans. Our "hell unpent" takes up about three minutes of the evening news. We have exactly the triangulated marriage of military-corporation-and-state that Dwight Eisenhower saw as a greater threat to the U.S. than communism as he left office in 1960.

That evening my wife, Gray Foster, and I sat down with a bottle of wine, and we stewed. I revisited my path to engaged pacifism, from an angry, violent, self-destructive, and often homeless teenager, through the Marine Corps, and into college, and on through adulthood-my thirties, forties, fifties-turning ever more deeply to the teachings of Buddhism, the practice of Zen, and my convictions about poetry. I remembered my first Zen teacher, a tiny Okinawan monk, who told me, "You must live as though you were already dead." That became perhaps the central *koan* of my life. It certainly played an important role during the twenty-odd years I lived in poverty, building Copper Canyon Press with Tree Swenson and learning book typography, letterpress printing, and studying/translating Chinese and Japanese classics . . . and building my home with my own hands. Ahhh. Living beside a woodstove, studying Tu Fu by kerosene lamp. It's romantic for about a week, then it's a way of life. The poets I translated taught me how to live; they showed me the Way of Poetry. I had taken a bodhisattva vow to follow the practice of Zen and the Way of Poetry, and I had been true to that vow for more than thirty years.

Souvenirs of Democracy

The business man, the acquirer vast,
After assiduous years, surveying results, preparing for departure,
Devises houses and lands to his children -- bequeaths stocks, goods --
funds for a school or hospital,
Leaves money to certain companions to buy tokens, souvenirs of gems
and gold;

Parceling out with care -- and then, to prevent all cavil,
His name to his testament formally signs.

But I, my life surveying,
With nothing to show, to devise, from its idle years,
Nor houses, nor lands -- nor tokens of gems or gold for my friends,
Only these Souvenirs of Democracy -- in them -- in all my songs --
behind me leaving,
To You, whoever you are, (bathing, leavening this leaf especially with
my breath -- pressing on it a moment with my own hands;
-- Here! Feel how the pulse beats in my wrists! -- how my heart's-blood
is swelling, contracting!)
I will You, in all, Myself, with promise to never desert you,
To which I sign my name.

I always liked Whitman for wanting us to read him in the bathtub, which is to say, naked. Naked is vulnerable. I liked him for asking us to touch him, to feel his pulse. And his vow to "never desert you" is really a vow to all humanity, not merely an expression of nationalism.

As much as I love my country-and I love it dearly -- I've never been a conventional patriot. I do not cherish a flag, nor do I take pledges of allegiance that might one day conflict with my bodhisattva vow. Kannon (Kuan Yin in Chinese) is the Bodhisattva of Compassion, and her name means "She-who-perceives-the-cries-of-the-world." I want to hear those voices and hear them clearly. I listen. When my love of country conflicts with the profound suffering and murder we impose on humanity, I must take my stand with suffering humanity. But I do especially love the U.S. Constitution and its roots of democracy that once flourished and now are imperiled by empire-builders and religious fanatics.

Walt Whitman's Caution

To The States, or any one of them, or any city of The States,
Resist much, obey little;
Once unquestioning obedience, once fully enslaved;
Once fully enslaved, no nation, state, city, of this earth ever
Afterward resumes its liberty.

Ed Abby loved that poem! The Patriot Act is one of the most insidious documents in our history, and the congressional representatives who turned over to Bush their constitutional responsibilities to mandate for or against war should be impeached or shamed into resignation. Only Congress shall have the right to declare war. The 1st, 4th, and 14th Amendments were (and are) being undermined by bloodless corporate honchos like Dick Cheney and Condoleezza Rice, and we now have an attorney general who is an apologist for torture. We have become a corporate state.

Mussolini said that the perfection of fascism would be found in the marriage of the corporation and the state. Government by Halliburton? Oil companies writing environmental policy? "Clean Air" acts that contribute to the toxicity of our environment, and "clean water" policies that lead directly to rivers full of dead fish and ocean fish we cannot eat because of mercury levels? Mussolini would be proud of George W. Bush. Ninety percent of the mass media in the U.S. is in the hands of a handful of international conglomerates. The American media were following Bush's party line and repeating his lies unquestioningly. Tax cuts for the supremely wealthy and millions of children "left behind"-this is a corporate state. We are the only industrialized nation in the world without a national health-care system; we pay more and get less. Europeans look at a huge, wealthy nation that executes children and they wonder what's wrong with us. How can we be so uncivilized? The world looks at the havoc we cause abroad while we gaze admiringly at our own reflection in a mirror.

Gray and I talked for hours. We called our old friends Hayden Carruth and William Merwin. Hayden had declined an invitation to the Clinton White House, we knew, and we wondered what kind of fallout or flak he'd received. We discussed every conceivable way to deal with the problem, even in-

cluding the idea of my going, just to listen to what fellow poets and Copper Canyon board members would suggest. But I knew, I just knew I could not go. I didn't even want to go picket. I just wanted to send them some poetry and make a statement against war. I believed then that this was the most dangerous administration in American history, and I believe that now.

My wife and I spent a mostly sleepless night. But I rose the next morning with a clear mind. This is the letter I wrote about 5 a.m.: "January 19, 2003. Dear Friends and Fellow Poets: When I picked up my mail and saw the letter marked "The White House," I felt no joy. Rather I was overcome by a kind of nausea as I read the card enclosed: 'Laura Bush requests the pleasure of your company at a reception and White House Symposium on 'Poetry and the American Voice' on Wednesday, February 12, 2003 at one o'clock." Only the day before I had read a lengthy report on George Bush's proposed 'Shock and Awe' attack on Iraq, calling for saturation bombing that would be like the firebombing of Dresden or Tokyo, killing countless innocent civilians. Nor has he ruled out nuclear weapons.

I believe the only legitimate response to such a morally bankrupt and unconscionable idea is to reconstitute a Poets Against the War movement like the one organized to speak out against the war in Vietnam. I am asking every poet to speak up for the conscience of our country and lend his or her name to our petition against this war, and to make February 12 a day of Poetry Against the War. We will compile an anthology of protest to be presented to the White House on that afternoon. Please submit your name and a poem or statement of conscience to: <http://poetsagainstthewar.org>. On line by January 31. Send submissions between Jan. 31 and Feb. 10. There is little time to organize and compile. I urge you to pass along this letter to any poets you know. Please join me in making February 12 a day when the White House can truly hear the voices of American poets. Sam Hamill."

I sent my letter to about forty poets. I did not alert media or anyone else other than the Copper Canyon Press staff and board of directors. We truly expected no more than a few hundred poems. Gray and our friend Nancy Giebink volunteered to download and format the poems as they came in. The initial letter gave Nancy's e-mail address for submissions. Within hours, she was utterly overwhelmed.

The next morning, I called Mrs. Bush's secretary to get details of the symposium and to let her know that I would not be attending but would send along a packet of poems representing a broad spectrum of American voices, plural. Alas, I got a recording announcing the symposium had been "postponed." (Two years later, the official White House position is: "postponed.") I learned only from fellow invited poets that the symposium would discuss Dickinson, Whitman, and Langston Hughes. This, frankly, offended me. For this White House to try to co-opt two, possibly three, homosexual poets, offended me; for them to try to use three of our most political poets offended me. The FBI and CIA followed Langston around for twenty years. Whitman would have despised these people, I am certain, because they are deeply, disturbingly undemocratic.

from "To a Foil'd European Revolutionaire"

Courage yet! my brother or my sister!
Keep on! Liberty is to be subserv'd, whatever occurs;
That is nothing, that is quell'd by one or two failures, or by any failures,
Or by the indifference or ingratitude of the people, or by any unfaithfulness,
Or the show of tushes of power, soldiers, cannon, penal institutes,

Revolt! And still revolt! Revolt!
What we believe in waits latent forever through all the continents,
    and all the islands and archipelagos of the sea;
What we believe in invites no one, promises nothing, sits in calmness
    and light, is positive and composed, knows no discouragement,
Waiting patiently, waiting its time.

(Not songs of loyalty alone are these,
But songs of insurrection also;
For I am the sworn poet of every dauntless rebel, the world over,

And he going with me leaves peace and routine behind him,
And stakes his life, to be lost at any moment.)

Whitman speaks of "the tushes of power" while sitting in contemplation like a Buddha. To take the way of poetry is to stake everything on the conviction that words are more powerful than weapons. The first task of the poet, for me at least, is to become a citizen of the world. The Arab poet is my sister, my brother, my grandmother I never knew. Those who must be shrouded by the burka, those who choose the burka, and those who reject the burka are my sisters. I believe each of them has something important to teach me. The path of poetry, the path of compassion, is dangerous at every turn. "Love thine enemy as thy self."

Had we behaved as Whitman's democracy after the September 11 attack, we would have expressed strong convictions about our faith in our Constitution rather than subverting it; we would have asked where such virulent anti-American sentiment was born and what fostered it -- as if we did not know. The United States has bombed more than forty countries since the end of WW II. We have empowered tyrants (including Saddam Hussein) and dictators when we could profit from it. Pinochet was brought to power by Henry Kissinger (with aid from Bush Sr.); Noriega is a product of the CIA. How many years did the people of the Philippines suffer under a U.S.-backed Ferdinand Marcos? It's a long, ignoble list, about which most of my compatriots know far too little. Our Constitution was not written for application only in easy times, to be subverted every time a bunch of people are overcome with fear. Fear brought the Nazis to power. We should have stood firmly and strictly by our Constitution and hunted down the people responsible. And we should have addressed the disease that lies at the heart of religious fanaticism as well as the rage that is the result of our own imperial behavior.

The September 11 attack on the U.S. was not the disease; it was a severe outbreak of the symptom. The disease is Superpower Fever: the disease is a profound disconnection between the American people and the ordinary, real people of the rest of the world; a government that lies, a government that creates needless suffering at home and abroad, a government that instigates war in order to advance its own power and agenda. The disease is mass media repeating the propaganda of the power elite without exercising the courage to ask the hard questions that expose a mean agenda. It has often enough been said: we get the government (and the mass media) that we deserve. Unfortunately, our government and our corporations are responsible for creating misery around the world, from sweatshops in Indonesia to ecological disasters in Iceland. Whitman envisioned a far different country:

Where the city stands with the brawniest breed of orators and bards;
Where the city stands that is beloved by these, and loves them in return
and understands them;
Where no monuments exist to heroes but in the common words and deeds;
Where thrift is in its place, and prudence is in its place;
Where the men and women think lightly of the laws;
Where the slave ceases, and the master of slaves ceases;
Where the populace rise at once against the never-ending audacity of
elected persons;
Where fierce men and women pour forth, as the sea to the whistle of death
pours its sweeping and unript waves;
Where outside authority enters always after the precedence of inside
authority;
Where the citizen is always the head and ideal -- and President, Mayor,
Governor, and what not, are agents for pay;
Where children are taught to be laws to themselves, and to depend on
themselves;
Where equanimity is illustrated in affairs;
Where speculations on the soul are encouraged;
Where women walk in public processions in the streets, the same as the men,
Where they enter the public assembly and take places the same as the men;
Where the city of the faithfulest friends stands;
Where the city of the cleanliness of the sexes stands;
Where the city of the healthiest fathers stands;

> Where the city of the best-bodied mothers stands,
> There the great city stands.

Whitman builds his great city on the shoulders of bards and orators, on the shoulders of poets. Whitman the oratorical optimist understands the cynicism of the politics of fear; he rejects the imposition of authority from "above," insisting that first there must be authority from within. He insists that it is not George W. Bush, but we, the people, who are responsible for more than 100,000 deaths and the decimation of a country that posed no serious threat to us. The citizen is the head, the ideal, and politicians merely our hirelings. The great city must arise from within us. The great and peaceful nation Whitman imagined is already there within us, if only we choose to imagine it and behave accordingly.

We were flooded with poems and letters of gratitude-and not a little hate mail. News broke about the "postponement" of the symposium, and we were flooded with news media. As we prepared for a national day of poetry readings and discussions opposing the war, we picked February 12, the day of Mrs. Bush's "postponed" event. We connected with a poets-against-the-war group in England, and another in Italy, and soon began developing an international network of poets opposing war. Poems continued to pour in that first week at one per minute: five thousand, six thousand, seven thousand . . . There was hate mail and a few death threats. There was a steady outpouring of gratitude from writers who felt silenced, exiled by this administration.

Our local internet provider called. Incoming mail was so heavy that it threatened to collapse the whole system. We called our old friend, Emily Warn, a Seattle poet who had worked at Microsoft. She connected us with Andy Himes at *Project Alchemy*, an organization that provides technical assistance for nonprofit organizations, and we formed a board of directors with Himes supervising creation of the *Poets Against the War* web site <http://www.poetsagainstthewar.org>. His enthusiasm burned so brightly that he later went on to create *Voices in Wartime* <http://www.voicesinwartime.org>, a companion website to *Poets Against the War*. And his engagement there led to his production of the film, *Voices in Wartime*, an outstanding documentary on poets and war. Time and time again I was asked by media people, "Why can't you poets just leave the politics out of your poetry?" The answer: Because "politics" isn't thrown into a poem like a spoonful of curry into the pot. Poetry is a large house and has plenty of room for the overtly political, the covertly political, the personally political, even attempts to be apolitical, which is almost impossible. It has political traditions. Homer was political, The *Iliad* is a great antiwar poem. Sappho evicted men from her community in part because she believed that "war-mongering is childish behavior." Anyone read Euripides or Sophocles? In *Antigone*, Haeman tells King Creon, "It is no polis that is ruled by one man." Who's more political than Dante? He wrote under a death sentence. Shakespeare? Lord Byron demanded a major overhaul of the English Parliament. Poetry is social speech in musical measure with traditions including the serious investigations of history and culture and language and the human condition. Don't start me on the Russians, the Spanish, the Chinese poets-in-exile past and present, the modern Greek poets….

I was attacked by a couple of former Nixon people on the op-ed pages of the (liberal?) *New York Times* and twice in the *Wall Street Journal*, all personal, ad hominem attacks, of course. The first *Wall* diatribe inspired one of my favorite moments during those hectic days. The phone rang. A voice said, "Hey, Hamill, you S.O.B.!" I assumed it was another threat and was about to hang up when the voice said, "This is Phil Levine. You've been savaged on the op-ed page of the *Wall Street Journal* and I'm fucking green with envy."

For the first time in modern history, poetry was being discussed and debated in newspapers and magazines-and on talk radio, of course. Another moment of delight: I was on the Michael Medved talk radio show. He is, I gather, a right-winger who spends a lot of time on "family values." I found him to be, unlike his fellow travelers, a civilized man in his conduct. No shouting, no name-calling, just earnest disagreement with my position. Then a call-in, "William from Hawaii on the phone." Medved asks, "Are you a poet, William?" The voice says he is, and I interrupt to explain that this is W.S. Merwin, and Medved yelps, "The W.S. Merwin? The great poet?" It was my only encounter with a right-wing

media personality who had clearly read at least one more or less living American poet. The others were still asking, as though entering the 20th century rather than 21st, "How come it don't rhyme?" A hundred years ago, Whitman was largely dismissed, his poetry laughed at. While he was singing a truly "American" idiom, his contemporaries continued to imitate the forms and syntax of their English masters. "Poetry is news that stays news" (Ezra Pound). American mass media is populated with people who are poetry-illiterate.

On February 17, in the midst of "the storm of the century," with New York City all but shut down, nearly 3,000 people showed up at Lincoln Center for "Poems Not Fit for the White House," sponsored by the Not in Our Name organization. They cheered, stomped, roared, and applauded through more than two rambunctious hours of joyful and sometimes heartrending protest from across the spectrum of American voices. And a moment for Stanley Kunitz, WW II conscientious objector, and another for Arthur Miller, who thanked me for starting Poets Against the War, introducing himself almost shyly, "My name is Arthur…."

On March 5, 2003, in the company of W.S. Merwin, Terry Tempest Williams, and PAW board member Peter Lewis, I delivered to Congress 12,000 poems by 11,000 poets opposing the war. We were hosted by Ohio Representative Marcie Kaptur, with Dennis Kucinich, John Conyers, Jim McDermott, and (my hero) Maxine Waters joining us. It is the largest single-theme poetry anthology ever compiled; if the manuscript were printed out, it would stand about six feet high. Poems have been read into the Congressional Record regularly since then. It has been quoted in the governing halls of England, France, Italy, German, Spain, and Japan, and many of the poems have been translated into various languages. At a dinner for organizers and compatriots, Seattle's Representative McDermott gave a deeply moving speech about how grateful he was for Poets Against the War and about the power of poetry. And in talks with Dennis Kucinich and Maxine Waters, I was struck by how much of the poetry they had read.

Working with 25 inexhaustible volunteer editors, in one week Sally Anderson and I edited 12,000 poems, selecting fewer than two hundred as representative of the whole, and the print edition of *Poets Against the War* became a best seller for Nation Books.

On a plane to Italy in the fall of 2003, I picked up a copy of the *New Yorker* someone had left behind and was astonished to read Mark Strand reviewing a huge selected poems of Pablo Neruda. He basically dismissed all of Neruda's overtly political poetry, glibly saying, "Political poetry has no legs." Excuse me? Has our reviewer read Sappho or the Chinese Poetry Classic? Does he realize that Neruda's "United Fruit Company" has been translated into something like a hundred languages? Has he heard the Mikos Theodorakis operatic treatment of *Canto General* that was performed to celebrate the fall of the rule of the colonels in Greece? Is *Paradise Lost* not a political poem? Our national anthem is a poem; most are.

The Italian press asked far more insightful questions, and its reporters were far less likely to be rooted in ignorant assumptions. I talked about Dante and Catullus, about Nazim Hikmet, Akhmatova, and Seferis and reminded them that Zbigniew Herbert was a young Dadaist fooling with words until he found himself in a Soviet prison, where he redefined his notions of poetry. They listened, they asked, and the Italian people responded to news of *Poets Against the War* with overwhelming enthusiasm. I spent ten days in Piacenza at a great literary festival with sixty or so writers from Europe, Africa, South and Central America, and Cuba. It was in Piacenza that I was fortunate enough to meet and read with Salah al Hamdani, an Iraqi poet in exile who had endured years in Saddam's prisons and who now makes his home in Paris.

Baghdad, Mon Amour

by Salah al Hamdani (translated by Molly Deschenes)

You cannot be crucified
On the side of a page

Of a story that is not your own,
Nor to the rhythm of the deaths that brood your plagues
Because there will be no cry to relieve your grief.

You cannot be crucified on the banks of the streams
Your body bleeds,
When the Euphrates washes away the secret of its soul
At the birth of a new defeat.
I know this:
No wound deserves a war.

You cannot be crucified at nightfall,
When you did not close your prayers
On the body of palm trees
Because there is no honorable assassin.

You cannot be crucified for the cinders of calamities,
For the tombs of your gods,
Or for the belief of a dying humanity.

Baghdad mon amour,
Not son, nor father, nor God,
No prophet crowned by the church will save your soul,
Not that of Mecca,
Not that of those who refuse
To share the olive trees in Palestine.

This is my notebook of war,
The years of exiles folded in a suitcase
Too long abandoned to the dreams of the convicted.

This is my share of victims,
My share of moon,
My harvest of nothingness,
My share of dust, words and cries.

This is my misfortune
Like a comma locking a line of ink.

Baghdad my love,
I was crouched in the corner of the page
In the shelter of the arid days,
Far from the torrents of blood
That carry the name of those shot with the silence of man.

Baghdad, mon amour,
Sitting like a Bedouin in a mirage
Lying on my shores, I cherished my own shroud.
Far from the cross, Fatima's palm and the star of David
Far from their books, their wars
Wandering in the sand of the dunes,
From the steppe to the city
I drag my body from season to season,
I trail you along from the couch to the mirror, from my room to the street
Between my writing and my solitude
In the shelter of their cemeteries,
Their martyrs, their morgues.

Baghdad my love,
You cannot tremble at the threshold of these ruins of days,
A civilization trained to kill
Violated your virginity.

Baghdad, city forever rebellious against your torturer Saddam,
You cannot groan at the only revelation of this hegemony,
Those who rushed around your body at death's door,

These "liberators" are their accomplices.

Madinat-al Salam,
City of peace,
Love in the soul of writing.

Baghdad my wound,
My father the working man died without knowing joy,
My mother mislaid her youth in the mirror
And the only witness to my first grief on your breast
Is the breath of the sand,
The starry sky and God's gaze on the call to prayer.

I wished so much today that man had never discovered fire
And cursed it to advance so much in its own din.

This soil that gave birth to me, today put to death.
Oh mother! I want to return inside your flesh
To hear the beating of your heart,
To quench my thirst in the murmur of your breath.

Very dangerous man, this poet with a huge, gentle, aching heart. Would our reporters ask him to "just leave the politics out of it?" How would Laura Bush "just leave the politics out" of the good gray Whitman? Langston had one subject: the African-American experience. How does one "leave the politics out" of that? I sat on that stage in the crowded little town square in Piacenza, and as I listened to Salah's elegant, steady baritone, I wept for my country and for his. I promised him afterward that I would get at least this poem of his, given to me in French, translated for an American audience.

I met with a number of mayors and city councils and such and was received warmly everywhere. And I had wonderful conversations-and sometimes little debates-with hundreds of high school students in Pisa and San Giuliano, where the mayor presented me with a big Italian "pace" banner and a lovely etching of the old city hall. During my travels in Italy, I wrote a long poem, "A Pisan Canto," reflecting on Ezra Pound and his politics and his time in the "gorilla cage" at the end of WW II, meditating on the character of those who would lead us now and on "the role of poetry" as I have perceived and practiced it for forty years.

Last fall, I spent two weeks at a gathering of poets in Lithuania, mostly in Vilnius, where I visited old haunts of Czesław Miłosz and reread many of his books. His notions of "poetry of witness" have had a profound influence on my practice. The Lithuanians were astonished to learn that Miłosz was very popular with American poets and readers. I visited a memorial park near Druskininkai that served to remind us of recent Lithuanian history -- the Nazis, the Soviets. I dubbed it *Scoundrel Square* but was far more deeply moved than that might sound. The ordinary faces and lives of people who sold out their neighbors, their country, their souls: I thought of my old friend Shirley Kaufman, who translated the poetry of Abba Kovner, a Jewish poet who grew up in Vilnius and led the United Partisan Organization against the extermination of the Vilna ghetto before settling in Israel in 1946. He called poetry "a way of asking forgiveness for the evil in human existence." Lithuania has risen from the ashes of evil; it has begun to glow like amber.

Most of the young poets I met were avoiding the political in their poetry except inasmuch as it is influenced by rap and other performance arts. But as that generation matures, it will find history resting squarely upon its shoulders. Perhaps poets like Adam Zagajewski will show them the way, if the "burden" of a Miłosz or an Abba Kovner is too great. There, as in Italy, I had the opportunity to extend cooperation between international organizations of poets, and to help get some good poetry translated. To see the U.S. from an Eastern European perspective, say, or from an Icelandic perspective, is to see ourselves with fresh eyes, with the eyes of the world, as various as each of them may be. I dream of an American administration that listens as much as it talks. The voices from the ghettos have important news to tell us still, as do those who have risen from its shadows.

Returning from Vilnius, I was sick at heart over Copper Canyon Press; I had been agonizing for more than two years. During his brief tenure as publisher at Copper Canyon Press, Thatcher Bailey had undermined respect for me and for my position, telling staff and board that my thirty years with the press was "just history," that "anyone can be the editor," and that he intended to "revision the press." He demanded my resignation as he departed. His behavior divided the staff and board and poisoned the well. I lost several outstanding staff members. Bailey is now director of Centrum, host organization to Copper Canyon Press at Fort Worden. One of his first official acts there was to dismiss me (with "honors," of course) from my position as director of the Port Townsend Writers Conference, and to do it publicly just two weeks before the 2004 conference was to begin. I didn't get the support I needed from senior staff at the press and could not function properly without it. A sacred trust was betrayed. I had no choice but to go. I will continue to support the poets and the poetry, of course: they have been my world for thirty-two years.

There is important work to be done with *Poets Against the War*, including a lot of work in development and organization, and I am presently committed to that. For the first time in history, there is a growing worldwide network of poets devoted to the traditional values of poetry and social engagement. Working together, we can help enlighten people everywhere, each in our own community, working together to make poetry better understood and to speak on behalf of decency and human rights wherever oppression raises its Janus mask. We can promote literacy and cross-cultural pollination, enriching our own lives and works in the process. And if some poet feels obliged to speak for those whose voices have been silenced, we might benefit by listening, even as that means listening to the dead. And numbering and naming the dead. If we're going to annihilate masses of people "for the good of the world," we might take the time and trouble to learn their language and cultural values and even their poetry.

Peace is born only within each of us, and peace in the world will never be achieved through the imposition of war. Whitman (like a Buddha) reminds us: order begins from within. Embody peace. Peace in the world or peace in the home, it is achieved only by mutual agreement to stand by a few well-chosen words. True peace is achieved from within, one person at a time. Poetry clarifies the vision. If war were an effective means to peace, the last century would not have been the bloodiest in all of history. Poets are good at helping people look more closely at words and all of their implications. The poem is a little body of language and music and enlightenment. A poem can embody or ennoble or inspire a moment of peace. A poem can change a life.

No, I could not walk away from *Poets Against the War*. Far too many people all across this world stood beside me in support of peace and poetry when I asked for a company of poets. I found myself asking whether being an ambassador for poetry was "right work" or "right practice," and I decided that indeed it is. Grampa Walt says it is my duty to contain multitudes, to dream a better U.S., where being a citizen of the world is a vital part of what we are. Emily tells me I have wild nights to live and fresh perspectives to discover. Langston reminds me that I still have a lot of brothers and sisters in chains (both visible and invisible chains: poverty is a prison), and that the struggle itself has merit. Jazz was born in the hearts of those who endured this country's greatest shame. Art matters. Those most abused, those left illiterate and impoverished, those with the least vocabulary-they invented the indelibly rich poetry of the blues. Sometimes that poetry made life worth living and their tales worth telling. Old Walt and Charley Patton remind me that I have a right to dream and a right to sing. Martin Luther King, Jr., reminds me that with those rights come real responsibilities, and that opposing violence in America can be dangerous.

Poetry saved my life when I was a misbegotten, self-destructive kid, and the way of poetry has determined the course of my life. It has saved, can save, and will save many others. Whether traveling on behalf of poetry and social engagement, teaching a little, or starting another press; whether printing on a letterpress or editing for someone else, or simply waiting for the first signs of spring, I plan to continue the proper conduct of my life-a life of service in the temple of poetry.

Note: The above essay first appeared Sam Hamill, "A Monk's Tale" in *Virginia Quarterly* 81.2 (2005): 129-45. Re-published by permission of *Virginia Quarterly*.

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