

**Musing Ourselves to Death, or
On the Formation of Poets in the Information Age**

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Where is the Life we have lost in living?
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?
The cycles of Heaven in twenty centuries
Bring us farther from GOD and nearer to the Dust.

– T.S. Eliot, *Choruses from the Rock*

In unrhymed free verse Eliot, the greatest poet-prophet of the twentieth century and Russell Kirk's singular example of a conservatively minded poet, intentionally evokes the rhythms and voice of the Old Testament prophets to chart a clear decline in civilization: Life, our culture as a whole, has devolved by exchanging wisdom for knowledge and knowledge for mere information. And we have lost, we have lost much in each exchange. The syntactical parallelism emphasizes the dire cycle that twins decay with secularization. So that now we boast and call ourselves denizens of the Information Age as if "information" was not an impoverishment "nearer to the Dust" than knowledge, and thus, two removes from anything resembling wisdom. To appreciate Eliot as prophet here consider the depth of media he was responding to: Writing around 1930 as a man in his forties, Eliot was born in the era of newsprint and photography, came of age along with radio, the typewriter, and the phonograph, and then witnessed the birth of moving pictures, then talkies. Even before television, Eliot had seen enough to adopt this prophetic stance toward a culture that was becoming awash in information. Now consider: All the meaningless information that "distracts us from distraction by distraction" which Eliot complained of decades ago is a mere fraction of the terabytes accessible in our pockets. We call our phones "smart" because of all the information they can access. Not knowledge. Not wisdom. Eliot is truer now more than ever.

I merely present these three phenomena as witness: 1) the venerable *Oxford English Dictionary*'s "Word of the Year 2015" is not a word at all but the "tears of joy" emoji; the website *PoetryTweets* is devoted to "poets" restricting themselves to Twitter's 140-character limit; and *Poetweet* is a mobile application that converts your prose tweets into your choice of lyric poetic form such as a sonnet. Where is the poetry we have lost in all this prose? Where is even the prose we have lost in pictographs?

My primary concern with this essay is not so much how poetry is made but how poets are made. To accomplish this task I will examine three wise, knowledgeable, and informed poems written by three wise, knowing, and well-informed poets: Each poem in its own way seeks to explain how the poet obtained his wisdom, his art, his poetic craft and vocation. Derek Walcott's "XIV" from his cycle of pastoral lyrics titled *Midsummer*, one of Wendell Berry's *Sabbath* poems, and Seamus Heaney's "Digging" all provide insightful glimpses into each man's formation as a poet. I hope to show where they think their wisdom comes from. These three, moreover, provide a useful bridge between Eliot, who was writing his great verse around the time they all were born, and our present day, since Heaney only recently passed away while Walcott and Berry continue to flourish. At first blush the success of all three as poets and voices of wisdom might prove the lie to Eliot's criticism as it applies to poetry, but their achievement would be better characterized as exceptions that prove the rule, as voices of a remnant that persist despite an unpropitious culture at large.

In terms of the evolution of media, our own day would appear to be even less propitious: To Eliot's new technologies and media consumption we must add not only television but the internet, social media, and portable devices that bring all of them with us wherever we go. So

before I get into the poets and their poems, I cannot help but glance further at this recent interface between poetry and Twitter that I mentioned briefly above.

At *PoetryTweets* the concept is poetical enough: Why cannot the 140-character limit of Twitter be as much of an occasion of wit as, say, the syllable count of haiku or the meter and rhyme of a sonnet? Ok. Poets writing tweets; poets tweeting poems. It is plausible. I suppose it could be done rather well. But just as not all poems are tweets, apparently not all tweets are poems. Here is the best I found: “Short is sweet but then I repeat. Short is sweet. Short is sweet.”¹ Allow me to explicate. Shortness or brevity is sweet, as in pleasant or desirable, compared to long-windedness or obtuseness. For emphasis, the key phrase is “repeated” but now as a sentence unto itself “Short is sweet.” And again. Now the assertion of the truth that short is indeed sweet is literally three times longer than it needs to be. Thus the poem, er, tweet is doing the opposite of what it says. Poets call this sort of thing irony. Irony is sweet. And the irony might almost rise to the level of Shakespeare himself. Recall how that tedious boor Polonius is the one that says “brevity is the soul of wit” while being anything but brief in one long-winded speech of advice after another. Hamlet’s rapier wit—you will recall—is what finally cuts Polonius off. But notice that “short is sweet” has literally taken the soul out of the wit of Shakespeare and left us with the bare equation that shortness or brevity = wit. And then this oversimplified equation is ham-fistedly repeated. I am willing to entertain the notion that Twitter itself has no soul, but that is getting ahead of ourselves here. I shall only insist that in this case Twitter lacks the soul of Shakespeare’s ironic wit.

Sweeter than *PoetryTweets* in this vein, however, is Matt Groening, creator of *The Simpsons*, with this brilliant ellipsis of Polonius’ famous maxim:

¹ *PoetryTweets* Web site, <https://twitter.com/poetrytweets>. “Exploring the Power of 140 Characters or Less” (accessed September 14, 2015).



2

By using quotation marks and ascribing agency for the elision to “Reading Digest,” a level of irony is attained that both gestures to the soul of Shakespeare’s original language and exceeds any simple identification of wit and brevity. *PoetryTweets*, therefore, is half as witty as Groening, and at best, a third as witty as Shakespeare. I am not saying that Twitter and other forms of micropoetry do not possess potential for making genuine poetry. I merely wish to point out that, as in writing good haiku, even our most skilled poets have found it more difficult than it first seems. But it also may be more than simply the reality that folks on Twitter are not the most poetically inclined. Considering Marshall McLuhan’s famous dictum, “the medium is the

² <http://i.imgur.com/tCJoQmc.jpg>. Screenshot from “Mr. Lisa Goes to Washington,” *The Simpsons*, episode 37, September 26, 1991 (accessed September 14, 2015).

message,” perhaps Twitter as a medium is inherently unpoetical. That is the starting point, by their own admission, for the concerned folks at *Poetweet*.

Poetry is natively absent from Twitter, according to them, and they are going to do something about it. “You’ve always wished your tweets were a little more poetic, right? Well, now there’s the perfect app for you: *Poetweet*. *Poetweet* mashes up your account’s recent tweets, letting you choose from sonnet, rondel or indriso forms. This simple website, which doesn’t even require sign in, will turn your tweets from banalities into sweet poetry.”³ Apparently, tweets are by nature banal and can only become “sweet poetry” if combined arbitrarily and turned into a more conventional lyric form that foregoes the 140-character limit. Two astonishing presuppositions are at work here: one, tweets in order to become poetry have to no longer be tweets and must become something else (so much for brevity is sweet); and, two, to become poetry a poet is not necessary. Let me explain how it works: The app mashes up the words from a set of tweets and produces a hash of verbiage that is, somehow, “sweet poetry.” A stunning metamorphosis that flies in the face of both basic computer programming and every school of poetics: banal prose in; sweet poetry out. Or shall I say, “hashtag sweet poetry?” Hashtag witty brevity. Hashtag wit-less brevity. Hashtag wit, less brief. Hashtag OMG poetry is dead/sad face/grim reaper emoji. But calling it “poetry” and “sweet” does not necessarily make it either one.

Now is the time to define what poetry is or what is poetry. Deriving from the Greek verb, *poiein*, “to make,” a poem is a made or created thing. Before modern English borrowed from the Greek the words for “poet” in both Middle and Old English were forms of “maker.”⁴ Richard Wilbur’s brilliant poem, “For C.,” evocatively explains that we can always recognize true art, for

³ *Poetweet* Web site, <http://thenextweb.com/apps/2015/01/22/website-will-turn-tweets-poetry/> (accessed September 11, 2015).

⁴ “Makar” and “scop” respectively.

it “has the quality of something made” and as examples suggests “a rose window” or “the firmament.”⁵ Notice that these two examples have quite different makers: the one artificial, man-made; the other natural, made by God. Human beings can be makers because they too are made, things made in the image of their Maker. Every generation, however, need not reinvent the wheel. Indeed, for the attainment of high art, mediation is necessary; a tradition of craftsmanship passed from generation to generation enables us to the make more elegantly or more eloquently. For a poet this tradition can be written—“oft through others’ leaves” Shakespeare acknowledges reading—or oral as in the case of Homer and the bardic tradition, or, as the Romantics were keen to emphasize, Nature herself can be a muse.

Derek Walcott, Seamus Heaney, and Wendell Berry each individually created exemplary bodies of work of high art that engages not only their faith and their roots to speak to the human condition, but did so only by first finding their muses through an orally transmitted culture. The callings of the voices they heard literally became their vocations, their muses. That is, Walcott, Heaney, and Berry all acknowledge, quite independently and separately, the seminal influence of their native communities on their poetic careers. They each became—in ways not entirely intentional or deliberate—memory keepers, rememberers, heirs and bestowers of a tradition or witness borne from a dual commitment to narrative and affection of place. They each were from somewhere. And that sense of where is crucial. And it towers in contrast over against what Berry calls “the rhetoric of nowhere”—the habitual use of abstract language that can speak of only “domiciles” and not “homes.” At least in the cases of the three poets I am discussing, it literally took a village to raise a poet. For each man the village they grew up in gave them the stories to tell, the affection and compassion to be moved and to move others through their eloquence. It is not an overstatement that their places made them poets. Not coincidentally all three were born

⁵ Richard Wilbur, *Mayflies: New Poems and Translations* (New York: Harcourt, 2000), line 28.

before WWII. What Heaney says of his growing up in Northern Ireland—“my local County Derry experience, which I had considered archaic and irrelevant to 'the modern world' was to be trusted. They taught me that trust and helped me to articulate it”⁶—is just as true of Walcott and his native island in the Caribbean, St. Lucia, or of Berry and his Port Royal, Kentucky. They each acknowledge this debt in their poetry to the oral tradition within their communities.

Let us begin with Walcott, from his cycle of pastoral lyrics titled *Midsummer*, recalling a frequent pastime for him and his twin brother in their youth: evening jaunts to the edge of town where the pavement ended into the tropical forest to hear Afro-Caribbean folktales from their great-aunt Sidone.

XIV

With the frenzy of an old snake shedding its skin,
The speckled road, scored with ruts, smelling of mold,
Twisted on itself and reentered the forest
Where the dasheen leaves thicken and folk stories begin.
Sunset would threaten us as we climbed closer 5
To her house up the asphalt hill road, whose yam vines
Wrangled over gutters with the dark reek of moss,
The shutters closing like the eyelids of that mimosa
Called Ti-Marie; then—lucent as paper lanterns,
Lamplight glowed through the ribs, house after house— 10
There was her own lamp at the black twist of the path.
There's childhood, and there's childhood's aftermath.
She began to remember at the minute of the fireflies,
To the sound of pipe water banging in kerosene tins,
Stories she told to my brother and myself. 15
Her leaves were the libraries of the Caribbean.
The luck that was ours, those fragrant origins!
Her head was magnificent, Sidone. In the gully of her voice
Shadows stood up and walked, her voice travels my shelves.
She was the lamplight in the stare of two mesmerized boys 20
Still joined in one shadow, indivisible twins.⁷

⁶ “Seamus Heaney Biography,” PoetryFoundation.org. (accessed December 1, 2015).

⁷ Derek Walcott, *Collected Poems; 1948-1984* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1986).

The first half of this brilliant poem describes the twin boys' journey on foot to Sidone's, the storyteller's, house. With the road they take being compared to an old snake, the conflation of things man-made with raw, mysterious nature begins. This fusion of art and nature builds as "leaves thicken" and the sunset "threaten[s]" while the encroaching darkness creates a palpable tone of foreboding. Mitigating any fear of the darkness as the boys enter the forest, however, is "her own lamp at the black twist of the path"—Sidone's house. Her light guides them. This is an older place, a pre-modern place beyond the threshold of village and civilization, where "folk stories begin." But before the storytelling commences, Walcott pauses in his reminiscence.

A single sentence and a single line interrupts the narration: "there's childhood, and there's childhood's aftermath." Walcott rhymes often but irregularly throughout the poem, but here in the middle of the poem we have its only couplet. It underscores the dramatic shift in the poem: Now "she began to remember." The stories begin. This moment, moreover, is precisely timed but not by any clock or watch or any analog or digital device—she began "at the minute of the fireflies" in rhythm with nature. The imagery shifts in accord with Sidone's storytelling from dark and foreboding to light and uplifting. The boys are "mesmerized" by her "magnificent" voice conveying her "fragrant" folk tales. Walcott brilliantly fuses art and nature with the single pun, "leaves," when he identifies her stories as "her leaves" that "were the libraries of the Caribbean." Leaves of the forest, of course, out of which her house stands and her stories emerge, but also leaves as in the pages of a book. Specifically the pages of Walcott's own books—those he reads and those he himself has written—for he acknowledges in the present tense "her voice travels my shelves." In doing so, Walcott is acknowledging Sidone as his muse, his inspiration, the source of his vocation as a poet.

Two other moments confirm this identification of Sidone as Walcott's muse, and by extension, as a significant factor in Walcott's understanding of his debt as a print poet conveying to the Anglophone world the venerable oral tradition of Creole folklore. First, Walcott interjects with a joyful exclamation: "The luck that was ours, those fragrant origins!" Notice how "fragrant" nicely conflates her stories with the flora. Secondly, just as her lamp guided the boys up the darkened path to her house, Walcott deftly engages a most apt and lucent metaphor at the end to bring the light imagery to its perfect crescendo. "She was the lamplight in the stare of two mesmerized boys," who in turn are forever and undeniably enlightened by this muse. Just as her voice was a dramatic shift in the poem, it also brings about a dramatic shift in the poet: Looking back now from the present, the established poet begins to remember, perhaps for the first time, the fragrant origins of his craft and how his poetic gift was nurtured in his childhood. "Childhood's aftermath" in Walcott's case here refers to his own poetry.

Another remarkable thing about Walcott's childhood, in light of our original question framed by Eliot about media and culture, is how he passed his time in his youth. Neither Berry nor Heaney deal with their childhoods so explicitly, so we should pause and wonder at what Walcott and his twin brother are doing. How many of us, or our children, or our grandchildren, have spent or spend even one night spell-bound in rapt attention by the voice of a relative two generations older? And call ourselves lucky? It is a pastime we have lost. Perhaps a pastime only possible in a world without the media stimuli that enamors and inures us and our children. If this is where Walcott's art came from, where will ours? It is not simply that Walcott has the benefit of this personal muse: Sidone represents, embodies, is mediating an entire culture that has been passed down orally for centuries. She is transmitting to the mesmerized boys through her storytelling the "libraries of the Caribbean." It is important to emphasize Walcott's metaphor

or blessed, I am silent.
 I go into the one body 15
 that two make in making marriage
 that for all our trying, all
 our deaf-and-dumb of speech,
 has no tongue. Or I give myself
 to gravity, light, and air 20
 and am carried back
 to solitary work in fields
 and woods, where my hands
 rest upon a world unnamed,
 complete, unanswerable, and final 25
 as our daily bread and meat.
 The way of love leads all ways
 to life beyond words, silent
 and secret. To serve that triumph
 I have done all the rest.⁸

The first twelve lines form one long sentence that covers the three main modes of Berry's writing and what motivates them: his poetry arises from love (line 2), his essays from bewilderment and fear (line 5), and his novels and short stories—his fiction—"from the air" (line 7) itself. All three ways of writing are compelled by words and stories that pass down to him "out of their deep caves/ needing to be remembered" (lines 11-12). Berry presents his writing career almost as one of reluctance—as if he would rather not have to write. But have to he must, and the sense of compulsion is unmistakable. Not unlike the draw of Sidone led Walcott and his brother to brave the twilight journey to her house, nor unlike how safe and how loved they felt in her mesmerizing luminous presence. Only here with Berry there is no Sidone, no one storyteller: The voices and stories he hears come from the air, out of their deep caves. They come from the land itself, and represent the living and dead of all who have dwelled in that place where Berry himself has lived, farmed, and written about his whole life. They are audible to Berry because he

⁸ Wendell Berry, *A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems 1979-1997* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 1998) "1994, Sabbath Poem VII."

has stayed in one place, been curious, and paid attention to the memory-keepers, the storytellers of his own community. This is his muse or his muses. If he does not write their stories, who will? And if he does not, how will their memories live on, or their hard-won knowledge or earned wisdom concerning “the way of love?”

Both Berry and Walcott write these poems as mature, successful poets at the height of their own worldly fame and success: Both position themselves precisely on the threshold between the generation before and the generation after them and recognize their poetic vocations as a necessary means of bequeathing a great gift from the earlier to the later generation. While it is true that by not having a Sidone figure and by describing the source of inspiration as coming “from their air” or “out of their deep caves,” Berry seems to avoid any direct human agency; an implied human community can be assumed especially in light of his other writings. In one essay, Berry explains that poetry exists “at the center of a complex reminding.”⁹ This complex reminding echoes the stories that “need to be remembered” in this poem, and in neither case can the stories in question be seen as simply the author’s autobiography. Certainly the poet creates out of his own experience or perception of experience, but, as this poem makes clear, that process begins outside of oneself from another by means of the way of love.

Poetry begins by answering this call of love: “I go into the one body/ that two make in making marriage” (lines 15-16). For Berry it is not as simple as his wife is his muse, but that the way of love that a life with her entails gives meaning and purpose. This way of love not only is prior to poetry, it transcends all language. It might help to think of such a transcendent purpose as the sublime itself—an irreducible and undeniable reality that is recognizable to and sought by all and yet somehow still retains an ineffable quality. “Beyond words, silent/ and secret” (line 28-9) describes not just marriage’s path of love but also the way of love found in “solitary work

⁹ Wendell Berry, “The Responsibility of the Poet,” *What Are People For?* (New York: North Point, 1990), 88.

in fields/ and woods” (lines 22-3). Recollecting one’s journey down these ways of love, be it marriage or communion with nature, is the purpose of poesy, that is, not only lyric poetry but all narrative art. In recalling one’s own journeys, furthermore, one finds paths already laid or trails blazed and often one finds others on the way; so the way of love inevitably places us in community. Hence, Berry’s “voices” and “words” coming to him in the night. The way of love down either path is not always attained or enjoyed, or more often the case, not in a way ever anticipated or expected.

The way of love always engages suffering for that is our world. Notice how both Walcott and Berry establish a tone of fear and real bewilderment in the face of darkness. The way of love is a hard road, one that belies any nostalgia on the part of the poet looking back. No triumph is taken for granted. In fact, for Berry the triumph is the lived journey down the way of love which by definition transcends language. The poetry can only serve that triumph which, as I have already noted, may not be one’s own. Imagine the silent and secret successes of all who have gone before us: Who will tell their story. That is the poetic vocation of which Berry and Walcott speak.

Echoing them heartily in this notion of vocation is the Irish poet Seamus Heaney. One of Heaney’s first published poems “Digging,” from 1966, dramatizes simultaneously a poet finding his voice and announcing his presence to the world.

Digging

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.

Under my window, a clean rasping sound
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:
My father, digging. I look down

5

Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds

Heaney's descriptive narrative relates two memories. Picture our poet: twenty-eight years old, well-connected in the Dublin literary world, and just beginning to make a name for himself. To get away for a day or two from the city and his young family, he goes home to the country to get some writing done. Pen in hand, sitting at a table, the blank page stares back. He's got writer's block. So he begins by doing what every creative writing professor advises, "Just describe what's around you, use all your senses." Heaney, or the speaker here, follows his ear to the window: the "clean, rasping sound" of his father digging (line 3). He then engages his sense of sight to see his father's "straining rump among the flowerbeds," and in doing so, the speaker is swept into a deeper reminiscence. "Twenty years away" he is taken back to his childhood where his father is digging up potatoes (line 7). All the respect and affection that Berry explicitly celebrates and that Walcott conveys concerning Sidone is brilliantly understated by the single line, "By God, the old man could handle a spade" (line 15). Which for the speaker, upon the utterance or upon the recollection, serves as a transition to another memory of digging—that of his grandfather.

The second memory begins, therefore, with the comparison of digging and the single line: "Just like his old man" (line 16). Coupled with the line of praise for his father, this elegiac couplet acts as a fulcrum, leveraging us into a scene featuring the grandfather's art. Beyond deft description the speaker here is outright bragging: "my grandfather cut more turf in a day/ Than any other man" (lines 17-8). His granddad's notion of a lunch break is Paul Bunyan or John Henry-like: "he straightened up/ To drink [the bottle of milk], then fell to right away" (line 20-21). At this point the poem could go in a couple of directions, and it all depends on the attitude of the speaker toward this daunting patrilineal work ethic he has just described.

The key line is “but I’ve no spade to follow men like them” (line 28). Envy or regret might be the speaker’s next move after this confession. He rather matter-of-factly is acknowledging that this venerable tradition of spade-work is now broken; he is not carrying it on. But his admiration, respect, and like-mindedness with his fathers beget a different response: one that is as humble as he is proud of his ancestors and as confident as they are unpretentious. He takes their combined example as motivation and inspiration. He does have a spade—his pen. And he has “good turf” to dig for: “living roots awaken in my head” (line 27). Heaney’s poetry, therefore, in Berry’s terms, serves the silent and otherwise secret triumphs of his father and grandfather who worked in harmony with nature to create a “life beyond words” (Berry, line 28). The poet’s work starts by digging into memory in order to narrate their success. Or in Walcott’s terms, Heaney’s origins as poet are no less “fragrant”; only they smell more of peat moss than tropical flora.

The larger question for this conference is how could such a transmission of culture that all three poets share happen today when such pre-modern and “irrelevant” places and lifestyles seem to no longer exist? Where is “the good turf” for us and how to dig for it? It is difficult to imagine how a generation from this existential nowhere is or will be capable of generating poetry that will stand the test of time. According to Berry, “the dominant tendency of our age is the breaking of faith and the making of divisions among things that once were joined.”¹¹ Of course, this is precisely what Plato has Socrates asking in the *Phaedrus* dialogue. For Socrates the shift he sees Lysias making in using a scroll instead of relying on his memory signals a disastrous paradigm shift from an oral culture to a written one. The media is the message, and the message, Socrates fears, is the death of true philosophy. Only philosophy did not actually die. Before we

¹¹ Wendell Berry, *Life is a Miracle: An Essay Against the Modern Superstition* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2000), 133.

ring poetry's death knell, we should consider ways in which the banality of technology is being overcome by contemporary poets who somehow manage to find an authentic muse despite the wasteland of mere information. Heaney and Berry both lay claim to an agrarian or pastoral connection to, not just a sense of place, but to a tradition of farming the land or working the soil; Walcott, of course, draws from his native ground as well—the Caribbean island of St. Lucia.

All three poets, however, were academics more familiar with big cities and major universities for decades of their lives than with any rural farm. All three are bookish sorts who learned their poetry from books in graduate school. So to a certain extent the pastoral traditions all three appeal to in these poems run counter to the prevailing arc of their own life and times. Even Berry, who famously and quite deliberately chose to live a more bucolic life by leaving first San Francisco and then New York for his native hills of Kentucky, still commuted for decades to Lexington to teach at the University of Kentucky. The nature of their appeals to a deeper wisdom as a source for poetry remain as difficult and yet accessible to us as it was discovered by each of them: Community in place among loved ones. The noises must be turned off, certainly, but there are songs to be found for any who seek to provide a voice for the silent and secret triumphs along the way of love that we have seen, with which we are all involved and to which we aspire.