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〈原著論文〉

## Poetry Anthologies and the Audience for Poetry

Kenneth O. ANDERSON

詩選集と詩を読む人々

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近年、出版された4つの詩選集は、詩が嫌いか読んだことがない、あるいは、詩に関心を持つことのなかった人々に対し、詩の魅力に触れる機会を提供することで、新たな読者を獲得することを共通の目的としている。本論文は、チェスワフ・ミウォシュ編『光輝くものの書—国際詩選集』(*A Book of Luminous Things: An International Anthology of Poetry*, 1996)、ビリー・コリンズ編『詩180—詩への回帰』(*Poetry 180: A Turning Back to Poetry*, 2003)、ギャリソン・キラー編による『優れた詩』(*Good Poems*, 2003) および『つらい時のための優れた詩』(*Good Poems for Hard Times*, 2005) の計4冊の詩選集を取り上げ、個々の編者がそれぞれの選集に寄せた序文の内容を手掛かりに、今日の詩選集出版の意義、目的について検討しようとするものである。その際、考察対象である詩選集に収録されている幾つかの詩の内容や解釈についても言及する。

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**Key words;** poetry, anthologies, contemporary, dissemination, cognitive dissonance, allusions

Four recent anthologies of poetry share the purpose of wishing to connect or reconnect poetry to a wider audience of people who either dislike poetry and never read it or are indifferent to it. This paper intends to examine and comment on this purpose as set out by the editors of these anthologies in their introductions and then select a sample or two of the poems in each anthology for comment.

### I. *A Book of Luminous Things*

*A Book of Luminous Things: An International Anthology of Poetry* was edited by the late Czeslaw Milosz, a Polish, Catholic poet who taught at UC Berkeley and won the 1980 Nobel Prize

for Literature. It includes many translations, including some by Milosz himself. Milosz states in his introduction that

My intention is not so much to defend poetry in general, but, rather, to remind readers that for some very good reasons it may be of importance today. These reasons have to do with our troubles in the present phase of our civilization. It has happened that we have been afflicted with a basic *deprivation* [italics in the original], to such an extent that we seem to be missing some vital organs, as we try to survive somehow. Theology, science, philosophy, though they attempt to provide cures, are not very effective “In that dark world where gods have lost their way” (Roethke). They are able at best to confirm that our affliction is not invented. I have written elsewhere of this deprivation as one of the consequences brought about by science and technology that pollutes not only the natural environment but also the human imagination. The world deprived of clear-cut outlines, of the up and down, of good and evil, succumbs to a peculiar nihilization, that is, it loses its colors, so that grayness covers not only things of this earth and of space, but also the very flow of time, its minutes, days, and years. Abstract considerations will be of little importance, even if they are intended to bring relief. Poetry is quite different. By its very nature it says: All those theories are untrue. Since poetry deals with the singular, not the general, it cannot — if it is good poetry — look at things of this earth other than as colorful, variegated, and exciting, and so, it cannot reduce life, with all its pain, horror, suffering, and ecstasy, to a unified tonality of boredom or complaint. By necessity poetry is therefore on the side of being and against nothingness (Milosz, xvi).

Milosz goes on to say that the influence of Chinese and Japanese poetry, in translation, on American poetry persuaded him to include some of the translations of these poems in his anthology. He notes that the poems are valuable to us both because they are timeless and because they remind us “that man may relate to the world not just through confrontation” (xvii). Milosz also mentions Schopenhauer and remarks that “Art liberates and purifies, and its tokens are those short moments when we look at a beautiful landscape forgetting about ourselves, when everything that concerns us disappears, is dissolved, and it does not matter whether the eye that looks is of a beggar or a king . . . The secret of all art, also of poetry, is, thus, distance. Thanks to distance the past preserved in our memory is purified and embellished. When what we remember was occurring, reality was considerably less enticing, for we were tossed, as usual, by anxieties, desires, and apprehensions that colored everything, people, institutions, landscapes. Remembering, we move to

that land of past time, yet now without our former passions: we do not strive for anything, we are not afraid of anything, we become an eye which perceives and finds details that had escaped our attention" (xix).

Milosz is wise enough to add "I do not pretend, though, that in selecting poems for this book I constantly kept in mind Schopenhauer's principles, because many texts included depart from those principles . . . I do not have any intention of subsuming the whole [anthology] under any all-embracing category, of objective, antsubjective poetry, or something of the kind. Yet, since I am obviously interested in the visible world, again and again unveiling itself and offering itself to the eye, I would have nothing against calling my anthology a book of enchantments" (xx).

Milosz is a very impressive presence in the world of poetry. Few poets have had his wide-ranging experience, wisdom, and courage. He participated in the Warsaw Uprising and later worked in the Polish embassies of both New York City and Paris. Later he became a professor of Slavic languages and literature at UC Berkeley. The poetry critic Helen Vendler said that, for her, Milosz's *Treatise on Poetry* is "the most comprehensive and moving poem' of the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century" (*Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, "Czeslaw Milosz"). Therefore, one is inclined to give great weight to Milosz's ideas and beliefs, including those expressed in his introduction to *A Book of Luminous Things*, and to the fact that poetry (and religious belief) sustained Milosz to the end of his life.

Yet poetry cannot sustain everyone, especially those who are *in extremis*. One thinks of such self-destructive poets as John Berryman, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Weldon Kees, and others who ultimately failed in the battle against depression and committed suicide; or of poets like Robert Lowell, of whom Elizabeth Bishop wrote after his death in her poem, "North Haven", "Sad friend, you cannot change." One thinks of the tragic death of Delmore Schwartz, or of Philip Larkin's despairing "Aubade". True, Larkin made poetry out of his despair, but one feels that that was of little or no comfort to him, nor did he derive any comfort from religion. And what of suicides? Are they condemned forever in the next world as well as failing in this one? What of the fate of Judas Iscariot, hanging himself after betraying Christ? God only knows.

Milosz speaks of being able to perceive the past more clearly through poetry, without the passions, anxieties, and strivings which plagued us when the past was the present, but this is not true for everybody. Fitzgerald's famous conclusion to *The Great Gatsby* comes to mind: "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past." Or, as he remarks in *Tender is the Night*, from book III, chapter 13:

One writes of scars healed, a loose parallel to the pathology of the skin, but there is no such thing in the life of an individual. There are open wounds, shrunk sometimes to the size of a pinprick, but wounds still. The marks of suffering are more comparable to the loss of a finger, or of the sight of an eye. We may not miss them, either, for one minute in a year, but if we should there is nothing to be done about it.

Fitzgerald himself, of course, came to a tragic end. Not everyone is able to withstand the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune”. Milosz himself suffered from depression at times, and in his anthology introduces the poem “Snow Storm” by Tu Fu, translated by Kenneth Rexroth, in this way: “The situation of amassed adversity — winter, evening, solitude, old age — can sometimes so depress that even a poet sure of himself feels the uselessness of writing. Those of us who have experienced such evenings will recognize ourselves in that voice.” (257)

Here is the poem itself:

Snow Storm

Tumult, weeping, many new ghosts.  
Heartbroken, aging, alone, I sing  
To myself. Ragged mist settles  
In the spreading dusk. Snow scurries  
In the coiling wind. The wineglass  
Is spilled. The bottle is empty.  
The fire has gone out in the stove.  
Everywhere men speak in whispers.  
I brood on the uselessness of letters.

Heartbreak is not confined to the old. Many who kill themselves are young. Another poem in Milosz’s anthology is about the end of Ernest Hemingway, who disparaged Fitzgerald for weakness of character but himself succumbed to despair as he grew older. The poem, “An Elegy for

Ernest Hemingway”, was written by Thomas Merton, whom, as Milosz points out, took refuge from his own despair in joining a monastery (208). Merton laments Hemingway’s suicide and concludes his poem with the line, “For with one shot the whole hunt is ended!” The hunt for salvation, for solace, for some kind of hard-won happiness ends in tragedy for many, and words cannot save them. As Hemingway himself wrote in *A Farewell to Arms* in chapter 37, “If people bring so much courage to this world the world has to kill them to break them, so of course it kills them. The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places. But those that will not break it kills. It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially. If you are none of these you can be sure that it will kill you too but there will be no special hurry.”

It’s no wonder that the poet Swinburne wrote in “The Garden of Proserpine”,

From too much love of living,

From hope and fear set free,

We thank with brief thanksgiving

Whatever gods may be

That no life lives forever;

That dead men rise up never;

That even the weariest river

Winds somewhere safe to sea.

Judas Iscariot makes an appearance in a poem in Milosz’s anthology by Tomas Tranströmer, “Outskirts,” translated from the Swedish by Robert Bly. Milosz comments, “A transformation of the landscape, and awareness of the alienation of man in new surroundings, transpire in this poem by Tranströmer” (130):

Men in overalls the same color as earth rise from a ditch.

It’s a transitional place, in stalemate, neither country nor city.

Construction cranes on the horizon want to take the big leap, but the clocks are against it.

Concrete piping scattered around laps at the light with cold tongues.

Auto-body shops occupy old barns.

Stones throw shadows as sharp as objects on the moon surface.

And these sites keep on getting bigger

Like the land bought with Judas' silver: "a potter's field for burying strangers."

The setting of this poem — a place of urban blight like so many others around the globe — may be in transition, but each transition brings worse degradation, since sites like these "keep on getting bigger". Cemeteries get bigger because there is no end to dying. Moreover, as Matthew 27: 8 reminds us, the potter's field bought with silver is also called the Field of Blood, since the silver was blood money. Construction often seems to be connected with graft and venality, and people often get killed in accidents because someone was bribed to cut corners in the construction. Often big projects are never finished: the money runs out or "the clocks are against it." And so it goes, an endless cycle of building and destruction in places that haunt the spirit and destroy the soul.

Not all poems in Milosz's anthology, of course, are so bleak. After all, his anthology is a book of "luminous things": light is meant to dispel darkness. Milosz also calls his anthology "a book of enchantments", and enchantments are meant to enchant, to rescue from despair. W. H. Auden, however, saw poetry as something which seeks, "by telling the truth, to disenchant and disintoxicate" (*The Dyer's Hand, and Other Essays*). "What is truth?" Pilate asked Jesus, to which Jesus gave no answer, although prior to his trial Jesus had said, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8: 32). And what is freedom? "Just another word for nothing left to lose," according to Kris Kristofferson. Some people can begin again when they lose. Others give up. Truth and freedom have different effects on different people. Poetry encourages some, but cannot reach others.

## II. *Poetry 180*

*Poetry 180: A Turning Back to Poetry*, was edited by Billy Collins, who was Poet Laureate of

the United States from 2001 to 2003. The title of the book suggests that Collins wishes to turn around the direction of poetry — into obscurity — 180 degrees and also tells us that there are 180 poems in it. It was, Collins tells us in the introduction to his anthology, his part in “the national dissemination of poetry” that recent poet laureates such as Robert Pinsky and Ted Kooser have undertaken (Collins, xvii). He says that the idea behind his book “was to assemble a generous selection of short, clear, contemporary poems which any listener could basically ‘get’ on first hearing — poems whose injection of pleasure is immediate” (xvi). One is skeptical of this idea that “short, clear, contemporary poems”, even though accessible, are going to make poetry any more popular. Poetry is only ever going to be appreciated by people who have discovered it for themselves and are predisposed to like it or by those who have had to read some at university and have developed a taste for it. But how many people continue to read poems after they graduate? Not very many, one suspects. Poetry is and will continue to be a minor art, unless it is the lyric to a popular song. It will not make any difference in most people’s lives and none in many people’s lives. Poetry, to use Auden’s famous phrase, “makes nothing happen.”

Be that as it may, Collins says that high school was “the focus of his program” for dissemination because “all too often it [i. e., high school] is the place where poetry goes to die” and that many adolescents find poetry “boring” (xvii, xviii). No argument there. He then goes on to discuss the infamous “difficulty” of poetry and how the difficulty can be removed or alleviated through having students write a poem out, say a poem out loud, memorize a poem, and so on. One is not convinced.

Collins continues that *Poetry 180* “was also meant to expose high school students to the new voices in contemporary poetry . . . The more I searched for poems, the more I became convinced that regardless of what other kinds of poems will be written in years to come, clear, reader-conscious poems are the ones that will broaden the audience of poetry beyond the precincts of its practitioners” (xx). Still not convinced. There even seems to be a shade of pandering in Collins’ choice of poems, as “Admittedly, some of these poems were selected to appeal to the interests of high school students [such as] cars . . . basketball [and] football” (xx). Unfortunately, cars are often the demarcation between students whose parents have enough money to give them cars to drive to school and students whose parents do not, and there is a great deal of snobbery attached to their ownership. Sports, especially football, are used to propel the strong over the weak and divide those who are attractive to the opposite sex from those who are not, and in this reader’s day males were told by gym teachers that one purpose of sports was to prepare them to go fight in Vietnam. Collins refers to high school as “that crucible where character is formed” (xxi); more accurately, high school is, to use the apt phrase with which Bill Watterson’s comic strip character



Calvin defines school, “state-sponsored terrorism.”

One thing that Collins doesn't mention about high school is that, at least in the high school days of this reader, to confess a liking for poetry was tantamount to confessing that one was a “fag” or a “queer.” Poetry was seen as pansy stuff, the kind of drivel that Ernie Kovacs sent up on 1950s on television in his role as the effeminate Percy Dovetonsils. Poetry acceptable to high school students of the time was to be found in the lyrics of rock music — but then, rock musicians were financially successful, sexually attractive, and, ironically, mostly outsiders who had hated school and saw rock music as a vehicle for propelling them beyond the constraints of their social class.

Nevertheless, Collins writes that he is “convinced that for every nonreader of poetry there is a poem waiting to reconnect them to poetry” and that “*Poetry 180* was aimed at creating a cognitive dissonance in students who ‘hate poetry’ by exposing them to a poem they find themselves loving irresistibly” (xxii). There may be such poems, but don't hold your breath waiting for that “magical reconnection”. The odds are that people who hated poetry in high school will continue to hate it after they graduate and avoid it. The more life changes, as Al Stewart sang in his pop hit “Nostradamus”, “the more it stays the same/and the hand just rearranges/the players in the game.”

Thinking of the first hundred poems to include in his book was easy, Collins tells us, but “[l]ocating the remaining eighty was harder, which might say something about the narrow bounds of my taste or the limited source of smart, clear, contemporary poems” (xxiii). That Collins' taste in poetry might be narrow and the source of good poems limited reinforces the idea that poetry is a minor and not very popular art. Collins admits as well that “good poems are poems I like and bad poems are poems I don't like . . . Flip through the book and pick a poem, any poem. I know every one is an ace, or at least a face card, because I personally rigged the deck” (xxiii).

This may well be true, but there is no accounting for taste. Poems are like people: we like some people and dislike others, and we don't always know why. It is like the Dr. Fell phenomenon in the old poem by Thomas Brown:

I do not like thee, Dr. Fell.

The reason why, I cannot tell.

But this I know and know full well,

I do not like thee, Dr. Fell.

So not everyone is going to like all the poems, whatever Collins says, and it is doubtful that anyone who is not already interested in poetry will ever take a look.

One poem in Collins' book makes clear what kind of students teachers often have to deal with. There's no missing the sarcasm of the poem, by Tom Wayman (Collins, 37, 38):

Did I Miss Anything?

Nothing. When we realized you weren't here  
we sat with our hands folded on our desks  
in silence, for the two full hours

Everything. I gave an exam worth  
40 percent of the grade for this term  
and assigned some reading due today  
on which I'm about to hand out a quiz  
worth 50 percent

Nothing. None of the content of this course  
has value or meaning  
take off as many days as you like:  
any activities we undertake as a class  
I assure you will not matter either to you or me  
and are without purpose

Everything. A few minutes after we began last time

a shaft of light suddenly descended and an angel  
or other heavenly being appeared  
and revealed to us what each woman or man must do  
to attain divine wisdom in this life and  
the hereafter  
this is the last time the class will meet  
before we dispense to bring the good news to all people on the earth

Nothing. When you are not present  
how could something significant occur?

Everything. Contained in this classroom  
is a microcosm of human experience  
assembled for you to query and examine and ponder  
this is not the only place such an opportunity has been gathered

but it was one place

And you weren't here

Collins includes "Notes on the contributors" at the end of his book, which is interesting and sometimes informative, but he doesn't have much to say about Wayman. However, at a University of Toronto website Wayman himself has the following interesting answer to the question, "How would you categorize the tone of ["Did I Miss Anything?"]?":

The speaker in the poem . . . is quite out of control with anger and hate, and is swinging between extremes of everything and nothing, just like he or she feels driven to the edge by the assumptions behind the repeated use of this question by students. The speaker is freak-

ing, pushed too far, at the end of his or her rope. The speaker realizes that what she or he is teaching isn't really anything divinely important. But what the teacher makes happen in class is not of zero value, either, as the question so strongly implies. So the speaker is really mocking the question that has been asked of him or her once too often (Wayman, "Did I Miss Anything?' FAQs," *Canadian Poets*).

Furthermore, in answer to the question, "Do you think your poem has a good effect on students?" (at the same site as the previous question), Wayman replies, "I stopped showing the poem to my students, because when I did they became more aggressive. The sentence they used after they'd read the poem became a declarative one, rather than an interrogative. After they missed a class or classes, they'd say to me: 'I didn't miss anything, did I.' The last two words were uttered like a dare." So much for a connection to poetry just waiting to be forged.

The late Richard Brautigan has a poem in Collins' book, and Collins does mention that Brautigan committed suicide. The poem, "It's Raining in Love" (Collins, 44-45) is a reflection on the unhappiness of love between men and women which ends with a girl unhappily in love and the speaker of the poem concluding, "Thank God, it's you, baby, this time instead of me." Brautigan's life was beset by poverty, mental illness, alcoholism, divorce and depression (*Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, "Richard Brautigan"; *Wikipedia.com*, "Richard Brautigan"): he was another poet who could not be rescued by poetry, either others' or his own.

A third poem in Collins' book, by William Matthews, details the failure of another poet to make clear to others the significance of poetry:

#### A Poetry Reading at West Point

I read to the entire plebe class,  
 in two batches. Twice the hall filled  
 with bodies dressed alike, each toting  
 a copy of my book. What would my  
 shrink say, if I had one, about  
 such a dream, if it were a dream?

Question and answer time.

“Sir,” a cadet yelled from the balcony,  
and gave his name and rank, and then,

closing his parentheses, yelled

“Sir” again. “Why do your poems give  
me a headache when I try

to understand them?” he asked. “Do

you want that?” I have a gift for

gentle jokes to defuse tension,

but this was not the time to use it.

“I try to write as well as I can

what it feels like to be human,”

I started, picking my way care-

fully, for he and were, after

all, pained by the same dumb longings.

“I try to say what I don’t know

how to say, but of course I can’t

get much of it down at all.”

By now I was sweating bullets.

“I don’t want my poems to be hard,

unless the truth is, if there is  
 a truth." Silence hung in the hall  
 like a heavy fabric. Now my  
 head ached. "Sir," he yelled. "Thank you. Sir."

Matthews emphasizes the uniformity of the people whom the speaker of the poem is addressing and their inability to think outside the box. After all, the job of the military is to break independent thought and mold men to one will, so that each and all of them become killing machines that do not question orders. The poet and they may share "the same dumb longings," but they aren't able to communicate these longings to each other, much less begin to understand each other, especially not through poetry. The poet's audience is certainly a captive one, and even he is not sure of what truth is. There is humor in this poem, but it is desperate humor, a whistle in the dark.

Matthews' own sad struggle against darkness and his early death at age 55 are told about in a book by his son, Sebastian Matthews (Matthews, *In My Father's Footsteps*). When one thinks of the fate of poets like Matthews and Brautigan, the reading of poetry becomes less comforting, and one turns away from poetry, at least for awhile.

### III. *Good Poems and Good Poems for Hard Times*

Both *Good Poems* and *Good Poems for Hard Times* were edited by Garrison Keillor of Lake Wobegone and *The Prairie Home Companion* fame. Keillor introduces *Good Poems* in his usual droll way, but some of his remarks are annoying. For instance, he writes,

The goodness of a poem is severely tested by reading it on the radio. The radio audience is not the devout sisterhood you find at poetry readings, leaning forward, lips pursed, hanky in hand; it's more like a high school cafeteria. People listen to poems while they're frying eggs and sausage and reading the paper and reasoning with their offspring, so I find it wise to stay away from stuff that is too airy or that refers off-handedly to the poet Li-Po or relies on your familiarity with butterflies or Spanish or Monet. (Keillor, xix)

First of all, can the goodness of a poem be determined by how well it succeeds in catching the ear of a listener to the radio (or at a poetry reading, for that matter)? A good poem is a good poem whether it connects with some listeners or not, for a good poem, as with any art, necessitates careful attention, which, in the case of a poem, means reading the poem as well as listening to it. Moreover, poetry readings are attended by all kinds of people, and not necessarily the overwrought and sentimental. Yes, working people are busy and often lack time for art in the workday world; but they make time for what is important to them, be it poetry or other interests.

As for poems themselves, what seems airy (or airy-fairy?) to one person may not be to another: there are all kinds of poems and it is all too easy to disparage a poem that may be good in its own way but is not to everyone's taste. As for offhanded allusions to Li Po, Spanish or Monet, the question is whether the allusion is necessary and right for the poem or is an affectation. A good poem does not need to be "dumbed down" so that anyone can understand it easily without having to think about it, and any work of art, including a poem, deserves further investigation which leads to further layers of meaning. Art can be appreciated on different levels; this doesn't mean that the more difficult levels have to be removed.

Again, Keillor seems to be judging by his own personal taste when he tells us what constitutes a good poem: "What makes a poem memorable is its narrative line. A story is easier to remember than a puzzle. (And there are rules in storytelling that make for a better poem: Stop Mumbling, No Prefaces, Cut to the Chase, Don't Sound Like a Writer, Be Real.)" (xxi) Yet there are good poems which are not narrative in nature, which include prefaces, which meander and are indirect, which employ unusual literary devices or create an alternate reality. The number of good poems that can be written is as varied as the number of people who write and read them.

Keillor, like Collins, includes biographical notes on the poets in both of his anthologies. It is striking how unknown many of them seem to be outside of their own small circles (which can, of course, be said of most people). What is appealing about them is they seem anxious to avoid the limelight: of Erica-Lynn Huberty and Thomas Alan Orr, in particular, there is almost no trace. Keillor writes of Orr that "he has achieved an enviable degree of privacy, so that researchers have failed to unearth any details about him except that he is a social worker and lives somewhere in rural America." (452) However, Orr's profile is to be found at Amazon.com (Orr, "Thomas Alan Orr's Profile," Amazon.com): he lives in Morristown, Indiana and describes himself as "a poet and rabbit farmer with a lifelong interest in American roots music." Included at Amazon.com are Orr's reviews of albums by musicians Dave Bromberg, Guy Clark, Ramblin' Jack Elliott, Eliza Gilkyson, Bill Morrissey, Robert Plant and Alison Krauss, Townes Van Zandt and Gillian Welch.

Other poets in Keillor's *Good Poems* who are not well-known, but of whom more information can be found on the Internet, are the late Bill Holm, the late Robert Lax, Thomas Lux, Richard Cecil and David Budbill. The websites for all of these poets are very interesting.

For some of the poets in both anthologies no information at all is given. An example is R. J. Ellmann (in *Good Poems for Hard Times*): not only is there no note on him in Keillor's book, there doesn't appear to be any information about Ellmann on the Internet. Perhaps Ellmann has taken the advice he gives to the poet in the only poem of his that Keillor includes in *Good Poems for Hard Times* (or perhaps Ellmann himself is the poet in this poem):

To a Frustrated Poet

This is to say

I know

You wish you were in the woods,

Living the poet life,

Not here at a formica topped table

In a meeting about perceived inequalities in the benefits and allowances offered to employees of this college,

And I too wish you were in the woods,

Because it's no fun having a frustrated poet

In the Dept. of Human Resources, believe me.

In the poems of yours that I've read, you seem ever so intelligent and decent and patient in a way

Not evident to us in this office,

And so, knowing how poets can make a feast out of trouble,

Raising flowers in a bed of drunkenness, divorce, despair,



I give you this check representing two weeks' wages

And ask you to clean out your desk today

And go home

And write a poem

With a real frog in it

And plums from the refrigerator,

So sweet and so cold.

It's interesting that Keillor includes "To a Frustrated Poet" in *Good Poems for Hard Times* when he says that he prefers poems that do not make allusions which the reader is expected to get, since Ellmann's poem includes allusions to both William Carlos Williams' poem "This Is Just to Say" and to Marianne Moore's poem "Poetry." The second allusion is to the line "imaginary gardens with real toads in them," which, in Moore's poem, is set in quotations, indicating that it is also an allusion, although no-one has ever been able to locate where the line comes from.

The speaker of Ellmann's poem is obviously angry and speaking sarcastically. But is Ellmann remembering or imagining a situation in which he himself was, or is, the poet about to be fired? Or is he himself the speaker who is about to fire the poet? Or is he both the speaker and the poet, angrily castigating himself for his shortcomings as a poet and a human being? It would be interesting to hear Ellmann himself talk about the ambiguity of his poem, but Ellmann, like many or most poets, isn't telling.

The introduction to *Good Poems for Hard Times* is more agreeable than the one to *Good Poems*. In the introduction to this book Keillor says,

The meaning of poetry is to give courage . . . It is meant to poke you, get you to buck up, pay attention, rise and shine, look alive, get a grip, get the picture, pull up your socks, wake up and die right . . . At times life becomes almost impossible, and you . . . despise your life, which seems mean and purposeless . . . love is lost, hope is gone . . . But it can help to say words. Moaning helps. So does prayer. God hears prayer and restores the souls of the faithful. Walking helps . . . Poems help . . . I hope [this book] does you some good. That was the reason for putting the poems together. These poems describe a common life. It is good to know about this. I

hope you take courage from it. (xvii, xxiii)

Hopeful words, but so many give up hope: “I had not thought death had undone so many,” as T. S. Eliot wrote in *The Wasteland*, alluding to the dead Dante mentions in *The Inferno*. Poets are compelled to write, but the slow suicide of tobacco, alcohol and other drugs often seems necessary to them as well in order to face the unbearable, until the unbearable overwhelms them. As the Canadian novelist and poet Margaret Atwood said in the Waterstone’s Poetry lecture, “On Writing Poetry,” which she delivered in Hay on Wye in Wales in June 1995,

Wordsworth was sort of right when he said, “Poets in their youth begin in gladness/But thereof comes in the end despondency and madness.” Except that sometimes poets skip the gladness and go straight to the despondency. Why is that? Part of it is the conditions under which poets work — giving all, receiving little in return from an age that by and large ignores them — and part of it is cultural expectation — “The lunatic, the lover and the poet,” says Shakespeare, and notice which comes first. My own theory is that poetry is composed with the melancholy side of the brain, and that if you do nothing but, you may find yourself going slowly down a long dark tunnel with no exit. (Atwood, “On Writing Poetry”).

Nevertheless, poets keep on writing, despite the lack of recognition and often the lack of hope. It is good to have anthologies and good to hear of and read poets that otherwise might not be known at all. In the long run, though, in the darkest night, poetry may not be enough.

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