
What Man Has Made of Man

by [A. F. Moritz](#)

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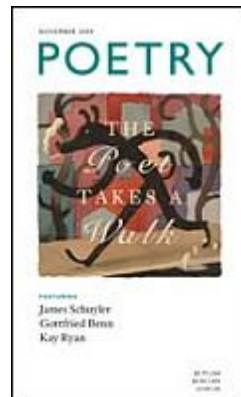
Here is a poem Juan Ramón Jiménez wrote for his mother in her extreme old age:

I wish I could carry you in my arms
from your life to nothingness
the way you carried me, when I was a child,
to the cradle from your breasts.

Notice the role of desire: I wish. The loving dialogue, a man speaking to his mother, giving back the care he received. The powerful, defiant transformations: the poet turns approaching death into a woman's breasts, and nothingness into a cradle. Notice too the near hopelessness of the desire and the way the poem holds out, not eliminating hopelessness but never defeated, maintaining life in the face of annihilation. This poem is a primary political document. In addition to and because of its rich human meanings, it has greater relevance to public action than any work of political philosophy or political science, any constitution, bill of rights, speech, or policy paper. In fact, a society's health might be measured by how it understands and admits that such a poem is essential to sound social organization. In each era, the relation of poetry and society changes; for us, it is bound up with the problem of isolation and communion—our basic social question. Sounding this question leads us to the role of poetry, in the general sense, as it exists, or could exist, in all of us, and in the specific sense, as poems.

Isolation and communion can be viewed in two ways. The first has to do with the private self. For each person, some isolation and some communion are necessary. A balance. Reflection and busyness. The contemplative life and the active life. Sainthood and heroism. In this perspective, "isolation," which has negative connotations, should perhaps be replaced with "solitude," which can mean a self-chosen retreat. The second way to view isolation and communion is social. Do we have satisfying access to our society or are we cut off from it, rebuffed and frustrated by it? Does it allow us to have an effect on it, a worthy place within it, or does it repel any decisive influence from individual persons, such that we feel ignored, even tyrannized over?

Today, it seems to me, this isolation and communion question, as it relates to society and politics, has one formulation that is most important. Society certainly permits and in fact requires participation, but does it do so only at the cost of agreement to preordained structures and behaviors that are non-negotiable? In other words, can

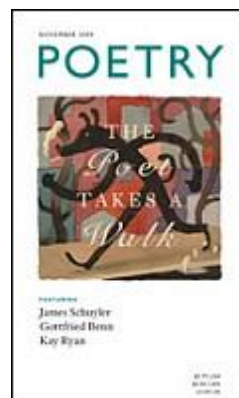


you only participate if you agree? Does society allow only certain forms of participation to be real, while others are basically illusions, distractions, games? For instance, are we required to work in the way the present economy dictates because otherwise society would collapse, while we're required to vote only to maintain the illusion we have true participation, an illusion without which we might revolt or despair and drop out, threatening the economy? Is the person who truly disagrees always thrust to the margins of social life?

I'm sure you recognize this tension. It comes to us all now and then, in one form or another. We constantly hear it, for instance, in the debate over voting that occurs around elections, such as the US presidential election of 2000. It's an essential question. The formative struggle of the modern individual's life is to find a place in society, as the whole history of the novel shows us. There's no such division as the one usually made, between inward and private life on the one hand, political and economic life on the other. It's a matter of life and death. Isolation is death. A society that isolates its individual members from itself, placing them in enforced solitude, or that gives them only a simulacrum of communion, is deathly, and it is deathly because what it believes in is death. Communion on the other hand is life and comes out of belief in life.

Another way of putting the social question of isolation and communion is Albert Camus' famous statement from *The Myth of Sisyphus*: "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy." Camus is not speaking of suicide due to clinical depression or other such causes, but the temptation to death in the person who feels a reason to doubt the value of life. "To be, or not to be—that is the question," said Hamlet, and Camus is a modern repetition. To believe in and choose life; to participate worthily in your society: these two are akin. Have one, tend to have the other. And the following two are also akin: to believe in and be dominated by death; to be isolated from your society, excluded and made little by it. By "believe" here, let me say in passing, I don't mean some supposed intellectual operation by which you can assert a thing that in fact you know nothing about. I mean the orientation of your entire life, all your thoughts, feelings, and actions, according to your deepest realization about existence, a realization so deep that often, like the circulation of the blood, it's hard to be consciously aware of it: a realization which, though it is intangible, is closer to you than physical facts, surer than the most seemingly irrefutable ideas, the most widespread opinions.

We could say, then, that "solitude" is the occasional seclusion each person needs, in which he or she makes up the creative contributions that can only come into existence through individual persons and their imaginations. "Isolation" is society's refusal of these contributions, such that the person is left to himself: a sort of prison without walls. The internal exile of being disregarded, of being given no role. Isolation must be turned into solitude. "The silence of God / I drank from the spring in the forest," wrote Georg Trakl during WWI. Solitude is like the forest clearing where someone draws from the spring, ancient symbol of inspiration, gaining the creativity that can only originate from individuals, though its results must be tested and developed in community. We all have our ways of attempting to do this and achieving it to one degree or another. But here the key reality is poetry. When we turn isolation into solitude by being creative and seeking ways to make this the basis of social life, we are poets. And poetry in the



specific sense, the art of verse, is the most complete, concentrated version of the universal inspiration, the human demand to exercise our own productive powers *and* to make them effective in the public realm.

This may seem a strong statement. But one implication of it needs to be made even stronger. Poetry is not at all what it's often said to be, the indulgence, development, and expression of private inward life. This is one of those half-truths that is the worst error, even a lie. Poetry is inward self-development *plus* the insistence that this must have a principal place in the public forum *plus* a third thing, a conclusion that flows from the first two. Everyone must be allowed full personal development, and everyone must be allowed full participation, since only full participation leads to full personal development, and in turn a proper society can only be produced by full development of each member. Poetry is, above every other human endeavor, the place where person and society are not merely joined but revealed in their original unity. Poetry is the place where the strange, painful division we have created between person and society is suffered, despaired over, denounced, subjected to comparison with memories and dreams and myths of better times, and given the gift of a prophecy: that the proper unity still and always persists, and that it can become the world we actually live in, not just in verse, but on both sides of our front door.

A strong light is shed on this matter by four lines from a poem by Czeslaw Milosz:

The first movement is singing,
A free voice, filling mountains and valleys.
The first movement is joy,
But it is taken away.

The Polish poet might simply be giving glorious expression to a gloomy but not unfamiliar view of human life, that we are delighted with the world as children, and later on we are duller, and disappointed. "The world is ugly and the people are sad," as Wallace Stevens puts the adult view. But when we read further in Milosz's book, which is entitled *Rescue* and which appeared in 1945, we see a couple of things. The poem is part of a group about WWII, as Milosz experienced it in Warsaw, the most devastated of the European cities. And this poem itself refers, later in its course, to the horror of war. Milosz writes:

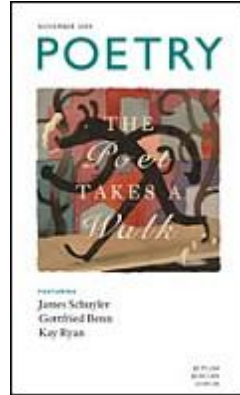
For since I opened my eyes I have seen only the glow of fires,
massacres,
Only injustice, humiliation, and the laughable shame of
braggarts.

He tells us that the form of society, its self-hatred and self-destructiveness, is what takes away the individual's joy. From this viewpoint, each person is a poet: someone whose underlying nature is to sing, to stand on a mountain and fill the valleys with voice and song, out of original innocence and passion. But this is taken away when the eyes are opened to "what man has made of man," to human behavior: fires, massacres, injustice, humiliation, and boasting about it by the winners. What destroys the child and brings on the adult's hopelessness and bitter expectations is not age, not a natural process, but the constant, depressing erosion that the social context exerts.

"What man has made of man": this is Milosz's subject in those four lines. And what man has made of man is summed up in the taking away of poetry, of song. But can we see the horrors of modern war as a fair emblem of human society? Milosz is not alone in presenting it as such. Think of Homer, or *Letters from Iwo Jima*. Often, crime stands in for war: think of *Oedipus Rex*, or *No Country for Old Men*.

Sometimes a work combines war with love and shows the terrible effect that society-as-war has on lovers: think of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Doctor Zhivago*.

The famous phrase “what man has made of man” was written by William Wordsworth in a time of war: the French Revolutionary Wars of 1792 to 1802, which after 1800 merged into the Napoleonic Wars that lasted to 1815: twenty-three years of almost unbroken international violence. Let’s recall the history of this phrase in such a way as to underline its meaning and continuing relevance. It occurs in the poem “Lines Written in Early Spring,” which Wordsworth composed and published in 1798, in the aftermath of great disappointment, exactly the sort of disappointment Milosz sings of. Wordsworth had been in France at the time of the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789.



At first he was an eager partisan of the Revolution. It seemed to promise that the world would suddenly be made new in the shape of justice, that people everywhere would shake off chains. “Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,” he wrote, “But to be young was very heaven!” Soon, though, the Revolution descended into ruthless violence, partisan exterminations, then war by France against neighbors, and Wordsworth renounced it. But he was in despair because his hope had been destroyed, and he felt he did not know who he was or what he should try to make of himself. His beloved England had opposed the new freedom, and then the new freedom had turned into cruelty and tyranny. Was there hope of freedom anywhere in the world? Was there any way of living that did not mean joining in a worldwide status quo of injustice: being given influence if you serve oppressive regimes, being let alone if you acquiesce in them, receiving poverty if you happen to occupy a lower rung, and oppression, even death, if you resist? Could any of this be called communion? Wasn’t the whole landscape nothing but isolation, because even if you agreed and participated, you really were denying yourself, falsifying yourself?

In this desolate situation, which was equal parts political and personal, Wordsworth set out to rebuild hope and a vision of possibility for a transformed society. He retired into solitude to create a new self and to see if he could imagine a new form of participation, a struggle for communion which would be already, in some sense, the community it aspires to. He tells us, in another poem, that in his new poetry he intends to sing

Of truth, of grandeur, beauty, love, and hope—
Hope for this earth and hope beyond the grave—
Of virtue and of intellectual power,
Of blessed consolations in distress,
Of joy in widest commonalty spread.

He wants his poetry and his life to “Express the image of a better time, / More wise desires.” And he convinces us that to hope this way is to live, right now, what is hoped for. Here’s one way of defining poetry. Poetry is an enactment of hope which is already the thing hoped for. Such is great poetry, prophetic poetry, the poetry of a Wordsworth or a Milosz. Poetic prophecy brings a possible future into a restrictive present, discovering and restoring vivacity in the midst of deathliness. Wordsworth writes:

I, long before the blessed hour arrives,
Would sing in solitude the spousal verse
Of this great consummation.

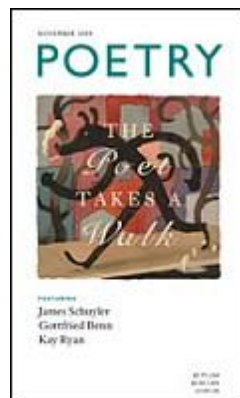
In a similar vein, more than a hundred years later, Juan Ramón Jiménez, longing for the renewal of his torpid Spain and its culture, and simultaneously looking forward to his own impending marriage, wrote of his hopes: “How sweet, how sweet, / Truth that is not yet real—how sweet!” Of course, how much more sweet when it shall become real. But still, Jiménez insists, as Wordsworth does, how sweet is this truth even now when we are waiting for it, hoping and living for it.

When in 1798 Wordsworth composed “Lines Written in Early Spring” and the phrase, “what man has made of man,” he purposely did not specify a limited cause of human sadness and torpor: war or greed or any such thing. Like Milosz after him, he saw that war was only one version, though one of the worst, of a deeper evil. Wordsworth simply offers himself as a sample human being living the rupture within him of private self and social world. He portrays himself as sitting in a grove, filled with pleasure, but soon with sadness too as he is inevitably reminded of the general human lack of pleasure:

To her fair works did Nature link
The human soul that through me ran;
And much it grieved my heart to think
What man has made of man.

The contrast in these four lines is the same one found in Milosz’s four lines. But Milosz presents it as two times experienced by one person: first singing, a free voice, joy, and then, later, this is taken away. In Wordsworth’s stanza, the contrast is positioned along a social axis: not two times in one person’s life, but two types of life that exist at the same time. On the one hand is the poem’s speaker, full of pleasant thoughts because he is creatively and harmoniously linked to his world, and on the other hand are those who now suffer “what man has made of man.”

Wordsworth’s phrase, in the poem, for this double vision is “that sweet mood when pleasant thoughts / Bring sad thoughts to the mind.” Why is such a mood called “sweet”? Recall that this is the same word (*dulce*) that Jiménez used for his prophetic grasp of a transformed future, the “truth that is not yet real.” Recall too that for Wordsworth, part of the great future he would sing is what he calls “blessed consolations in distress.” One part of these consolations is knowledge, that is, the poetic vision that reveals the world is greater and better than we take it to be, greater and better than we make it with our behavior. And one part of these consolations is action, the brotherhood of extending hope to one another, practically, effectively, through means of touch and communication such as poetry. The mood that causes our own pleasure to make us suffer humankind’s misery is sweet because this is a mood of brotherhood, of compassion, and of realism, of embracing the world as it is rather than isolating oneself within one’s own garden or fortress, one’s moment of enjoyment. The voice speaking Wordsworth’s “Lines Written in Early Spring” is not perhaps a portrayal of reality in the sense of the way we usually feel and the thoughts we usually have. Maybe this voice even implies a constant openness to suffering and evil that it’s hard to see how we could ever achieve and still live. The voice is an example of “the image of a better time, / More wise desires,” of the human soul that cannot feel its own happiness without also feeling others’ unhappiness and which, mysteriously, remains happy in the splendor and grandeur of existence. Wordsworth tells us that, try hard as he could to remember the proofs that existence is just an empty mechanism and men are nothing



but each other's murderers and jailers, his vision remained different: "And I must think, do all I can, / That there was pleasure there." And if he knows this, then, he asks in conclusion, "Have I not reason to lament / What man has made of man?"

Maybe one of the chief things we should notice about this little poem is what it says without saying anything. There is no harshness to the lament. No one is vilified. No one is told that he lacks a soul. There is regret for lost possibility. But there is no sense that the possibility is definitively lost. The poem is not tragic. It exerts an attractive pressure on the reader to transcend what man has made of man, to change it, to make the phrase come to mean something good. The poem presents itself as a statement, a self-description of a moment and a thought, and yet it is a dialogue. We feel ourselves included, not talked at. It fills us with insight and the kind of sorrow that leads to resolve, both personal and political. It teaches us something. But it's not didactic. You couldn't even say it's educative, the way Plato's Socrates is, trying to draw out of his hearers the knowledge they already have without realizing it. The poem teaches in the way that association with a great and visionary companion does. A companion who disdains to be "charismatic," who does not try to overawe or lead us, who fully respects our own creative response. "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

The Milosz poem that I quoted from, whose title is "The Poor Poet," proceeds quite differently than does "Lines Written in Early Spring." About midway through, Milosz has a stanza that presents poetry under the image of the poet's pen, which can create an Eden, because in writing anything is possible, we can say what we please:

I poise the pen and it puts forth twigs and leaves, it is covered
with blossoms.
And the scent of that tree is impudent, for there, on the real
earth,
Such trees do not grow, and like an insult
To suffering humanity is the scent of that tree.

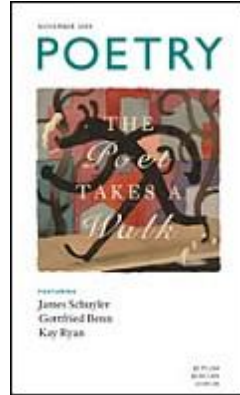
The poem accuses poetry. But not, in the end, for being an imaginary garden, but rather for not doing what it could have done to acknowledge the real human situation and deliver the seeds of a hopeful personal life and a beneficent politics. "I was he who knew / And took from it no profit," the poor poet says at the end of Milosz's poem. He stayed apart from society, in the imagined superiority of a great insight into human folly and his self-indulgent vision of universal, cataclysmic violence. He did not struggle for a place at the table and a voice that was heard, and therefore he lived unknown and failed to contribute the needed warning and poetic vision of human possibility.

But Milosz's poet does not despair. Or rather, he despairs, goes through that hell, that death, and comes back. He embraces and determines to turn to good the terrible lesson of hatred, weakness, and destruction, including his own contribution to it. "What has no shadow has no strength to live," he says elsewhere in *Rescue*. And he sums up his current state in a famous outburst from the book's final poem, "Dedication":

What is poetry which does not save
Nations or people?
A connivance with official lies,
A song of drunkards whose throats will be cut in a moment,
.....
That I wanted good poetry without knowing it,

That I discovered, late, its salutary aim,
In this and only this I find salvation.

We're all familiar with the phrase, aimed satirically at our own society, "being entertained to death." Maybe we can recognize in much of the flood of films, television programs, popular music, sporting events, advertising, and publicity exactly that "poetry," in one sense of the term (and the sense in which Plato was using it when he expelled it from the ideal republic), that is a connivance with official lies and a song of drunkards whose throats are about to be slit. The distraction that people embrace, so as not to have to contend with a situation which may ruin them tomorrow. "The roar at soccer games upholds the state," Milosz writes in another poem. In a line from "Dedication," he mocks what he calls the "hope of fools, rosy as erotic dreams." And of course it is exactly rose-colored erotic dream glasses that most of this material we've just mentioned offers us to view the world through.



All this thinking, which Milosz undertook as he endured the war in Warsaw, working in the resistance, seeing the destruction of the city, the slaughter of its people, the murder of the Jewish ghetto, brought him to a position, and a vision, that is marvelously close to Wordsworth's. A complex vision, it extends throughout Milosz's many works, but the poem from *Rescue* called "Love" gives the pith of it:

Love means to learn to look at yourself
The way one looks at distant things
For you are only one thing among many.
And whoever sees that way heals his heart,
Without knowing it, from various ills—
A bird and a tree say to him: Friend.

Then he wants to use himself and things
So that they stand in the glow of ripeness.
It doesn't matter whether he knows what he serves.
Who serves best doesn't always understand.

Milosz sees that if we allow that a bird and a tree are our equals, then they give us friendship, and the result of this is a flow of emotion, a desire, a motivation: to make sure that we ourselves and all things get to "stand in the glow of ripeness." That nothing is crimped or destroyed but that each thing develops as it should. There's even a whisper, subtle but unmistakable, that an eternity of ripeness, a perfect late summer or early fall, a moment of ultimate development, mature but with all the freshness of youth, is our eternal state. The state of the fruit that Adam and Eve could always pick, at all seasons, in the garden, and the state of Adam and Eve themselves, perfect in their bodies and minds, ideally mature and ideally young at once. Not the least thing the poem does is remind us what a rich word "ripeness" is: "the ripeness is all."

What Milosz sings about in "Love," Wordsworth shows the singer actually doing in "Lines Written in Early Spring." How, exactly, does one go about "look[ing] at yourself / The way one looks at distant things / For you are only one thing among many," so that they recognize you and call you friend? In his stanzas Wordsworth provides an example:

Through primrose tufts, in that sweet bower,
The periwinkle trailed its wreathes;
And 'tis my faith that every flower
Enjoys the air it breathes.

This faith, a seeing of enjoyment in all things, is what gives Wordsworth both his own pleasure in the bower and his compassion at what man has made of man. Remember, he said, "To her fair works did Nature link / The human soul that through me ran; / And much it grieved my heart to think." The grieving for humankind comes from listening, and receiving a linkage. From this in turn springs a creative response, love for men and women, grief for their pain, and a clear-sighted analysis of its cause: their failure of vision, and the resulting self-belittlement, a hopeless view of existence, and weakness that prevents them from breaking their isolation. So we are led to an understanding of Wordsworth's powerful phrase. What man has made of man is, at bottom, an unfortunate being who is self-shut-out from the vision of enjoyment and from friendship with the elements. This is a worse problem than war, than injustice and brutality, than harmful and insulting imbalances of wealth, because it is the basis and cause of all of them. And it is poetry that penetrates to this truth, reveals it, keeps it in front of us, and most significantly, most strangely, mingles it with hope, making the total situation, for all its horror, beautiful through being capable of beauty. "What has no shadow has no strength to live."

In memory of Michael Hamburger

About the Author

A. F. Moritz has written more than fifteen books of poetry, most recently [The Sentinel](#) (House of Anansi Press), which was awarded the Griffin Poetry Prize in 2009. He recently edited [The Best Canadian Poetry 2009](#) (Tightrope Books).

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