

## **Show Your Work**

by Matthew Zapruder

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Once, in high school, I met a girl who liked very strange music. She was in art school and lived in the city. She gave me a record, and when I went back to my room in the suburbs and put it on, it sounded like a garbage truck backing up over a giant bag full of aluminum bagpipes and dead robots. I played it over and over, until the music finally made glorious sense to me. Listening now to “White Light/White Heat” by the Velvet Underground, I can’t remember what it was like to be the person who couldn’t hear that music.

What is the purpose of literary criticism? Among other things, to guide the reader past his or her resistance. Most art, subtly or aggressively, resists the familiar. Poetry in particular suffers from this resistance, because poets take the material that we depend on to operate in and make sense of the world (language), and bend it to other, often seemingly obscure, purposes.

Readers, sophisticated and beginner, need critics to explain why and how poets are using language for these different purposes, and what those purposes might be. Our attachment to familiar language is powerful, and understandable. Without critics, we will hold on to the familiar and be unable to accept that there are other uses for language, that there is new and exciting poetry all around us.

Critics can do one of at least two things. The first is simply to insist that something is good, or bad, and rely on the force of personality or reputation to convince people. The second is to write, with focus and clarity, about how the piece of art works, what choices the artist has made, and how that might affect a reader. Only then can the reader grow to meet work that is unfamiliar, that he or she does not yet have the capacity to love.

Today, in American poetry, very few critics take it upon themselves to examine the choices poets make in poems, and what effect those choices might have upon a reader. As a consequence, very few people love contemporary American poetry. Many more might, if critics attempted to truly engage with the materials of poetry—words and how they work—and to connect poetry with an audience based on an engagement with these materials.

Think of visual art. Today, the public generally accepts paintings that derange our ordinary ideas of how things should look. Hardly anyone goes into an exhibit of Picasso paintings and complains that the lady's nose is on the side of her head, and therefore clearly Picasso is a crummy painter. People will even willingly stand before a Rothko or Pollock with a basic understanding that there is something called "abstract art," where the shapes in the painting are not intended to correspond directly to what we see in the world. They may not "like" or "understand" it, but at least they know there is a difference between abstraction and representation.

The reason? At least in part, it's because museums and curators and critics (Clement Greenberg and Alfred Barr come immediately to mind) and of course artists have discussed and fought about and brought forward ideas about abstraction and representation that have trickled into the public consciousness over the last 60 years.

Surely I am idealizing the world of painters (something poets like to do). Surely art criticism has its own problems. But I think anyone who has been to a museum or gallery or walked by public art would agree that there is a difference between abstract and representational impulses, and that the community—curators, viewers, artists—at least has a basic shared idea of what that difference is. And regardless of value judgments, or arguments about what does and does not constitute abstraction or representation, almost anyone would, I think, also agree that those terms are essential to creating the conditions for interesting discussions about visual art. Yes, they are only a beginning. But poets and poetry critics have not done the hard work necessary to explore, refine, and develop whatever terms might help us to even begin to talk about poetry in ways useful to understanding it, not as pieces of prose chopped into lines, or as fragments of linguistic decoration, but as poetry.

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Of course there are good reviewers who write interesting, thoughtful, and provocative pieces about American poetry. But look for yourself at the vast majority of reviews in journals, in print and online, and ask yourself whether for the most part the writers are doing a good job of actually describing what the poems are trying to do, how they are doing it, and why anyone would be driven to write (not to mention read) these poems. Are these reviews in any way truly helpful for understanding poetry?

Fundamentally, this is a problem of a failure on the part of critics to discuss, or even understand, the actual material of which poems are made. Stéphane Mallarmé felt compelled to remind Degas that the poet does not write with thoughts but with words. When you read poetry reviews, ask yourself how much time and energy is spent talking about the “thoughts” being “conveyed” by the words in the poem, versus the actual means of conveyance, i.e., the choices the poet has made with the language. This hegemony of content over form in the mind of the critic is at the very heart of the uselessness of mainstream poetry criticism in America; in turn, the reaction to talk about the fact of form without any reference to its possible purposes or effect on a reader is a glaring flaw in much criticism that appears in smaller journals and on blogs, particularly ones that are primarily interested in so-called “experimental” poetry that foregrounds its own formal innovation.

In visual art criticism, a common understanding of the difference between abstraction and representation has led to far more sophisticated and interesting blurrings of those categories than would have been possible without the initial distinctions. What would be a comparable distinction in poetry? Attempts to transfer the language of visual art directly onto poetry—i.e., discussions of “abstract” vs. “literal” or “representational” poetry or use of words—can be interesting but are not particularly helpful. It seems too

obvious to say that paint is not language. But for many years, probably out of an unconscious acknowledgment that painting criticism has a more useful language than that of poetry, we have been talking about language as if it were paint. Often poems are called “abstract,” but I think that is misleading: all words are both abstract and concrete in nature, and calling a poem either “abstract” or “literal” is to deny the very thing that makes poetry so mysteriously powerful: its ability, like words, to be simultaneously general (belonging to us all) and particular (connected to individual experience).

The discussion of narrative vs. lyric modes seems promising. One could immediately object that those two modes are (a) not mutually exclusive and (b) almost always both present in any poem. This of course is also true of the abstraction/representation distinction, but these concepts remain extremely useful starting points for discussions of visual art, so maybe “narrative” vs. “lyric” could work for poetry.

The problem, however, is that “narrative” and “lyric” are ultimately categories that don’t exclude or refine any behavior at all in poetry. The use of the terms as oppositions to each other presume that if one is present, the other will become a decorative aspect. That is, singing becomes something we do to make telling a story more interesting or beautiful, and telling a story becomes something we do to make our singing more interesting or beautiful.

But when you actually read poetry, you see this is simply not the case. The story and the song go hand in hand. The terms “narrative” and “lyric” sound good, but they don’t really help make actual distinctions between kinds of poems; ultimately, the terms just become ways of describing various social communities. A “conservative” magazine publishes “narrative” poetry, and an “experimental” journal publishes “lyric” poetry, etc., though of course immediately in the course of saying this it becomes clear that those terms, narrative and lyric, no longer refer to the actual mechanisms of the poems, but are mere shorthands for degrees of supposed experimentation and coolness. Which is useless to understanding poetry.

So if not abstraction and representation, and if not narrative and lyric, what would be an example of a useful distinction? I propose the following: Does the poem have a single, particular, specified consciousness, speaking in a relatively identifiable situation? Or does the poem have a less defined consciousness, speaking without need of or reference to a particular situation?

Granted, that is not the most elegant formulation. I will leave it to critics, if they are interested, to refine the distinction and come up with better and more accurate terms (ones that will perhaps have the added benefit of moving us beyond the arbitrary “School of Quietude” and the oxymoronic “Post-Avant”). Of course, this is just one idea, but to me this distinction at least begins to directly engage with the actual experience that readers have with poetry.

There are many ways I can imagine this distinction functioning. One is to take two poets who are generally lumped together in the same general category, and bring their actual

poems out into the light so we can see the different ways they operate. Rae Armantrout and Brenda Hillman, for example, are two West Coast poets who are most often associated with the hopelessly imprecise label “experimental” or, even more uselessly, “post-language.” Yet their approaches are actually quite different in ways that are not superficial.

For instance, here is the beginning of Hillman’s “Little Furnace”:

—Once more the poem woke me up,  
the dark poem. I was ready for it;  
he was sleeping,

and across the cabin, the small furnace  
lit and re-lit itself—the flame a yellow  
“tongue” again, the metal benignly  
hard again;

and a thousand insects outside called  
and made me nothing

One can clearly see a situation. There is a single consciousness, relating a particular event, in a definite situation. In a cabin, the speaker is woken up by “the dark poem.” There is another person there, a “he,” who is sleeping. The poem goes on to become a place where the speaker can think and talk about many things. But it begins with a particular situation, and the fact of that situation—the presence of the other person, the actuality of being in that particular place—is absolutely crucial to an understanding of what the poem is saying to you and to me.

It is perhaps obvious that the fact of a single narrating consciousness and situation—what is often referred to, dismissively when practiced by other poets, as “narrative” poetry—not only does not preclude, but in fact makes possible, the great lyric excitement of the poem. But the contemporary critic is likely, because of the specific speaker and situation, either to ignore the lyricism and simply talk about this poem as if it were prose, or, because of Hillman’s supposed affiliation with an “experimental” or “lyric” school of poetry, to talk about the poem without any reference to its narrative qualities.

Here is the beginning of a poem by Rae Armantrout, “Upper World”:

If sadness  
is akin to patience,

we're back!

Pattern recognition  
was our first response

to loneliness.

Here and there were like  
one place.

But we need to triangulate,  
find someone to show.

At first, this poem seems to resemble Hillman's, but were we to read this poem the way we must read the Hillman poem, we would be lost in frustration, looking for a particular speaker and situation where it does not exist. This poem does not present itself as the manifestation of a particular consciousness in time. It is a more generalized "we," and the words seem to emanate from our collective experience, or even a zeitgeist. The "we" in this poem is all of us, and the poem enacts for us how "we" all feel, at least sometimes. Partially this is the case because of a general condition of being alive, described in the first two lines; and partially this is the case because of how we first learned to experience the world. "Pattern recognition / was our first response // to loneliness" is, presumably, a way of describing how as infants or toddlers we first learned to perceive, and how that learning affected us emotionally.

Were we to try to fit this poem into a particular situation—one that is in no way indicated by any words of the actual poem—we would also struggle, painfully, to fit the (I think humorous) interjection "we're back!" into some kind of story. To me, that little moment is an acknowledgment of some embarrassment about speaking so grandiosely, from the "we" perspective. "We're back!"—once again, here we are talking for everybody! It's a small, subtle, tonal moment. Others might disagree about where that interjection comes from, but I think we would all agree that trying to make it part of a hidden, unspecified story would be a waste of time. Yet, sadly, it isn't hard to imagine such "close readings," with their manufactured scenarios and untethered relations among imaginary characters, taking shape on campuses and in apartments all over the abject land.

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This distinction I am making is only one among many that a critic could use to clarify a reading experience. My use of it is only for the purpose of giving an example of the kind of work I think critics should be doing. I want to emphasize that I am not making the argument that poems that are primarily (to propose a term) "situational" are better than those that are not, or vice versa. Rather, I believe that without a clear consideration of this issue, poems that do rely primarily on situations and specific speakers will be discussed primarily in terms of their content, whereas poems that do not will be either completely misunderstood or treated purely as formal exercises.

Just as most paintings cannot be said to be clearly either "abstract" or "representational," most poems cannot be said to be either strictly organized around one defined

speaker/situation, or not. Language belongs to all of us, and any use of it is in some sense common. And any series of lines or sentences, no matter how unusually or unexpectedly juxtaposed in a poem, immediately starts to accrue some kind of personality for the reader. Yet I am convinced that an analysis such as the one I have suggested above, or others like it based on different distinctions, can start to ground us in an understanding of what the poem is and is not doing. And because such discussions begin from a perspective of how a reader might be likely to react to the poem, they are likely to be useful. Even if one finds oneself saying, "I am nothing like the reader the critic is postulating, and my reactions are nothing like this reader the critic imagines," one will still have points of reference and common terms with which to disagree, and to begin to further consider the issues.

American poetry is at a stage of great vibrancy and variety. There are too many different approaches to list. We can vehemently agree and disagree about which ones we like and dislike. But until we have some ways of talking about poetry, we won't be able to advance beyond the most superficial, and frankly tedious, expressions of preference.

I remember that my geometry teacher used to write at the top of my tests, in giant capital letters, SHOW YOUR WORK! This is what I often find myself silently screaming at the pages of yet another diffuse review. I believe that as a reader I am, like almost anyone except the reviewer and perhaps his or her unfortunate subject, much more interested in the kind of thinking that led to the judgments of quality than the judgments themselves. We cannot have great poetry without great poetry criticism, so critics, please, do your job. We are counting on you.

#### COMMENTS (SELECTED):

**Bill Knot** (poet, teaches at Emerson College)

*What is the purpose of literary criticism? Among other things, to guide the reader past his or her resistance.*

—hoo boy, what arrogance—the "reader" doesn't need a guide; most readers are intelligent enough to find the poets they need to read without being led by the nose by critics—

Hillman's and Armantrout's readers for example, all 800 of them,

and Mary Oliver's readers, all 80 thousand of them—

this kind of arrogant condescending Zapruderism is what drives so many potential readers away from poetry: fortunately there are counteractive patrons of poetry, Garrison Keillor for one example, who bring accessible poetry to a wider audience—

Zapruder is an elitist promoting elitist poetry, but who knows, if he works at it he might increase its audience to 801.

**Tom McCauley:**

Bill, your argument that Mary Oliver is a superior poet to Hillman and Armantrout because Oliver has more readers can't be a serious one.

Roseanne had way more viewers than Twin Peaks, but that doesn't mean Roseanne was the better show.

Same with Ricky Nelson and Buddy Holly. You've got your work cut out for you if you try to prove Ricky's songs trumped Buddy's simply because Ricky's sold more. Those shiny-haired bastards and their fancy geetars.

**Michael Robbins** (poet, critic):

Bill,

Your dismissal of poetry with small readership is incoherent. Do you not think that these poems are received within a specific cultural context, and that the characteristics of that culture have some bearing on the popularity or lack thereof of different kinds of work?

It should be pretty easy to imagine a possible culture which would value poetry with different qualities, no? And if that's too much of a stretch, then how about looking ahead one or two hundred years? Is it your position that the poems that are popular now, and no other poems or kinds of poems, will be popular then?

Among other points, Zapruder is connecting the small audience for certain kinds of poems with a missed opportunity for good engagement with that work by critics. What's elitist about that?

And while we're at it, let's also give at least some credit to the artists who make those works, and consider that perhaps, although their poems may appear opaque or even be truly difficult poems, there is valuable information to be found there. That could be the case, no matter how they compare to Mr. Keillor's work.

**Bradley Paul:**

While I agree that poetry criticism is in terrible condition, I don't think that explains the difference between audiences' different receptiveness to abstract painting vs. "abstract" poetry. (And I use the abstract vs. representational terms here with all the usual disclaimers.) Millions of people every year see and like work by Picasso, Rothko, whoever. Few of them read art criticism, which, really, is beset by the same problems as poetry criticism.

But they're more receptive to it because, by this point, they're familiar with it. The general public is exposed at an early age to abstract painting -- the first real art a

schoolchild sees, on a field trip to a museum, is just as likely to be abstract as it is to be representational. "Picasso" is a household name; "Ashbery" is not. Most people aren't exposed to "abstract" poetry until they're in college, and only then if they actively study poetry. Otherwise, the poetry they're exposed to is generally much more narrative -- or at least can be reduced to a dramatic narrative. Shakespeare certainly has many moments of "abstraction" or "difficulty" or whatever you want to call it, but there's always a bad teacher or a bad Kenneth Branagh movie to boil it down to "Hamlet dies at the end."

Far more important than art critics in this indoctrination are art owners. If someone pays \$140 million for a Jackson Pollock, then, by god, schoolchildren and tourists and college kids are going to see it and appreciate it. They're the ones that make sure that abstract art is mainstreamed -- because, among other reasons, such mainstreaming protects and raises the value of their investment. No one pays \$140 million for a poem. There's no money in it; therefore, there's little institutional interest in making sure it's appreciated.

Of course, all this is contingent upon accepting the analogy of abstract art and abstract poetry as a valid one. I'm not sure it is. Once you remove the narrative from a painting, you still have color, line, balance, and other visual components that have meaningful impact in and of themselves. Non-narrative art can still have visual meaning. Can non-narrative poetry? Does such a thing truly exist? Even in the Armantrout poem cited above, we see such recognizable entities as "sadness," "patience," "loneliness," "But." While the poem as a whole may be characterized as non-representative, the words themselves are still representative. A truly non-representative poem -- one that uses fragments of sound, letter combinations that do not form words -- is pretty much gibberish. But perhaps that's an entirely different discussion.

**David Krump**, quoting W.H. Auden:

"Writers, poets especially, have an odd relation to the public because their medium, language, is not, like the paint of the painter or the notes of the composer, reserved for their use but is the common property of the linguistic group to which they belong. Lots of people are willing to admit that they don't understand painting or music, but very few indeed who have been to school and learned to read advertisements will admit that they don't understand English."