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# 'I Yield My Time to the Gentleman From Stratford-Upon-Avon'

By BILL KELLER

Eleven summers ago I was sent to a management program at the Wharton School to be prepped for bigger things. Along with lectures on finance and entrepreneurship and the like, the program included a delightfully incongruous session with Al Filreis, an English professor at the University of Pennsylvania, on poetry.

For three hours he talked us through "The Red Wheelbarrow" and "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." The experience — especially when contrasted with the appalling prose of our other assigned reading — sent me fleeing to the campus bookstore, where I resumed a long-interrupted romance with meter and rhyme. I started with college-era familiars (Larkin, Yeats, Dickinson, Cummings) and then, over the years, picked through the writers serendipity brought my way. A review got me started on Elizabeth Bishop. Friends gave me Frederick Seidel and Seamus Heaney. A publisher introduced me to Kay Ryan's witty morsels. I stumbled on Brad Leithauser and the Scottish poet Don Paterson in bookshops. I carry my favorites as subway companions.

I prefer craft to spontaneity, accessible to esoteric, and poems that engage both head and heart, but that's just me. I'm no literary critic, let alone a poet (excluding the birthday doggerel I compose for my very tolerant older daughter each year). I read for pleasure, not for self-improvement. Yet I've come to understand better why poetry belongs in, say, a Wharton program for midcareer corporate executives.

Professor Filreis says that he is "a little shocked" at how intensely his Wharton students respond to this unexpected detour from the businesslike, not just as a respite but as a kind of stimulus. Many write afterward asking him to recommend books of poetry. Especially now.

"The dire economy seems to make the participants keener than ever to think 'out of the box' in the way poetry encourages," he told me.

Which brings me to Congress, an institution stuck deeper inside the box than just about any other these days. You have probably heard that up on Capitol Hill, they're very big on prayer breakfasts, where members gather over scrambled eggs and ask God for wisdom. You can judge from the agonizing debt spectacle we've watched this summer how well that's working. Well, maybe it's time to add some poetry readings to the agenda.

Pause here while I acknowledge the rolling of eyes. My own editor allowed, when I told him what I wanted to propose, that the idea raised “a tiny, very, very small red flag,” presumably about my need for a little vacation. Poetry? Congress? Really?

Really. Seriously. I mean, sure, I might prefer corporal punishment, or taking away their parking places. But a little time out from the bloodless discourse of the chamber and those lobbyist arm twists and hive-mind caucuses so that they can enjoy a little food for the imagination — could it hurt?

I’m not suggesting that poetry will guide our legislators to wisdom any more than prayer has. Just that it might make them a little more human. Neither am I proposing that lawmakers pay more attention to the music of their oratory. Mario Cuomo’s well-worn dictum, that politicians should campaign in poetry but govern in prose, still holds true; the problem is that Washington is hardly governing at all.

Poetry is no substitute for courage or competence, but properly applied, it is a challenge to self-certainty, which we currently have in excess. Poetry serves as a spur to creative thinking, a rebuke to dogma and habit, an antidote to the current fashion for pledge signing.

“In poetry there are no absolute pledges prior to understanding what’s being said,” Filreis says. “If you go to a poem with a prior commitment, you’ll get neither edification nor pleasure from it. Poetry is *open*.” It is, moreover, an invitation to consider the inner lives and circumstances of others — for instance, the 14 million despairing jobless so marginalized in the latest political pageantry.

The poet Shelley, in a rather highfalutin defense of poetry nearly two centuries ago, wrote, “A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own.” Shelley concludes that essay by calling poets “the unacknowledged legislators of the world,” because they bring imagination to the realm of “reasoners and mechanists.” “Mechanist” is an old-fashioned word that translates roughly as “Grover Norquist.”

The relevance of poetry was declared more succinctly in five lines from the love poem “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower,” by William Carlos Williams:

~~&nbsp;~~*It is difficult*  
*to get the news from poems*  
~~&nbsp;~~*yet men die miserably every day*  
~~&nbsp;~~*for lack*  
*of what is found there.*

I asked David Orr, the poetry columnist for the Book Review, to prescribe some poems that might, if closely read and considered, be of value to our ossified Congress. Given that Orr titled his provocative new guide to modern poetry “Beautiful and Pointless,” I wondered if he would be

up for harnessing poetry to such a utilitarian assignment. But he said that while he hesitates to say that people “should read poetry,” which makes it sound like flossing or taking a vitamin supplement, he has no problem saying that certain specific people might benefit from reading certain specific poems. As an antidote to the smug feedback loop that constitutes our current politics, he offered poetry that encourages “hesitation, doubt and ambiguity.”

“If our representatives have spent the last few months huffily asserting, our poets have spent the past century hesitantly questioning — and the latter approach seems far more useful to the country at the moment,” he said in an e-mail.

You’ll find several poems Orr offered as apt to our political paralysis at The 6th Floor Blog, but here is one that seems too perfect not to quote in full. Besides, how often does a columnist get Philip Larkin to write his kicker?

*Since the majority of me  
Rejects the majority of you,  
Debating ends forthwith, and we  
Divide. And sure of what to do*

*We disinfect new blocks of days  
For our majorities to rent  
With unshared friends and unwalked ways,  
But silence too is eloquent:*

*A silence of minorities  
That, unopposed at last, return  
Each night with canceled promises  
They want renewed. They never learn.*

• *Bill Keller is executive editor of The New York Times.*