

Dana Gioia

Excerpt from “Poetry as Enchantment” (2015)

Academic critics often dismiss the responses of average readers to poetry as naïve and vague, and there is some justification for this assumption. The reactions of most readers are undisciplined, haphazard, incoherent, and hopelessly subjective. Worse yet, amateurs often read only part of a poem because a word or image sends them stumbling backwards into memory or spinning forward into the imagination. But the amateur who reads poetry from love or curiosity does have at least one advantage over the trained specialist who reads it from professional obligation. Amateurs have not learned to shut off parts of their consciousness to focus on only the appropriate elements of a literary text. They respond to poems in the sloppy fullness of their humanity. Their emotions and memories emerge entangled with half-formed thoughts and physical sensations. As any thinking person can see, such subjectivity is an intellectual mess of the highest order. But aren't average readers simply approaching poetry more or less the way human beings experience the world itself?

Plato

Excerpt from *Theaetetus*, 155d (c. 369 BCE)

**Socrates:** For this feeling of wonder shows that you are a philosopher, since wonder is the only beginning of philosophy...

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Aristotle

Excerpt from *Metaphysics*, 982b (1<sup>st</sup> Century BCE)

It is through wonder that men now begin and originally began to philosophize; wondering in the first place at obvious perplexities, and then by gradual progression raising questions about the greater matters too, e.g. about the changes of the moon and of the sun, about the stars and about the origin of the universe.

Rachel Carson

Excerpts from *The Sense of Wonder: A Celebration of Nature for Parents and Children* (1965)

A child's world is fresh and new and beautiful, full of wonder and excitement. It is our misfortune that for most of us that clear-eyed vision, that true instinct for what is beautiful and awe-inspiring, is dimmed and even lost before we reach adulthood. If I had influence with the good fairy who is supposed to preside over the christening of all children, I should ask that her gift to each child in the world be a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life, as an unfailing antidote against the boredom and disenchantments of later years, the sterile preoccupation with things that are artificial, the alienation from the sources of our strength.

If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder without any such gift from the fairies, he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement, and mystery of the world we live in. Parents often have a sense of inadequacy when confronted on the one hand with the eager, sensitive mind of a child and on the other with a world of complex physical nature, inhabited by a life so various and unfamiliar that it seems hopeless to reduce it to order and knowledge. In a mood of self-defeat, they exclaim, "How can I possibly teach my child about nature—why, I don't even know one bird from another!"

I sincerely believe that for the child, and for the parent seeking to guide him, it is not half so important to know as to feel. If facts are the seeds that later produce knowledge and wisdom, then the emotions and the impressions of the senses are the fertile soil in which the seeds must grow. The years of early childhood are the time to prepare the soil. Once the emotions have been aroused—a sense of the beautiful, the excitement of the new and the unknown, a feeling of sympathy, pity, admiration, or love—then we wish for knowledge about the object of our emotional response. Once found, it has lasting meaning. It is more important to pave the way for the child to want to know than to put him on a diet of facts he is not ready to assimilate.

...

What is the value of preserving and strengthening this sense of awe and wonder, this recognition of something beyond the boundaries of human existence? Is the exploration of the natural world just a pleasant way to pass the golden hours of childhood or is there something deeper?

I am sure there is something much deeper, something lasting and significant. Those who dwell, as scientists or laymen, among the beauties and mysteries of the earth are never alone or weary of life. Whatever the vexations or concerns of their personal lives, their thoughts can find paths that lead to inner contentment and to renewed excitement in living. Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts. There is symbolic as well as actual beauty in the migration of the birds, the ebb and flow of the tides, the folded bud ready for the spring. There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature—the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after the winter.

I like to remember the distinguished Swedish oceanographer, Otto Pettersson, who died a few years ago at the age of ninety-three, in full possession of his keen mental powers. His son, also world-famous in oceanography, has related in a recent book how intensely his father enjoyed every new experience, every new discovery concerning the world about him.

“He was an incurable romantic,” the son wrote, “intensely in love with life and with the mysteries of the cosmos.” When he realized he had not much longer to enjoy the earthly scene, Otto Pettersson said to his son: “What will sustain me in my last moments is an infinite curiosity as to what is to follow.”

Søren Kierkegaard  
Excerpt from *Works of Love* (1847)

Is this indeed love, to want to find it outside oneself? I thought that this is love, to bring love along with oneself. But the one who brings love along with himself as he searches for an object for his love (otherwise it is a lie that he is searching for an object—for his love) will easily, and the more easily the greater the love in him, find the object and find it to be such that it is lovable. To be able to love a person despite his weaknesses and defects and imperfections is still not perfect love, but rather this, to be able to find him lovable despite and with his weaknesses and defects and imperfections. Let us understand each other. It is one thing fastidiously to want to eat only the choicest and most delectable dish when it is exquisitely prepared or, even when this is the case, fastidiously to find one or another defect in it. It is something else not merely to be able to eat the plainer foods but to be able to find this plainer food to be the most exquisite, because the task is not to develop one's fastidiousness but to transform oneself and one's taste.

Or suppose there are two artists and one of them says, "I have traveled much and seen much in the world, but I have sought in vain to find a person worth painting. I have found no face that was the perfect image of beauty to such a degree that I could decide to sketch it; in every face I have seen one or another little defect, and therefore I seek in vain." Would this be a sign that this artist is a great artist? The other artist, however, says, "Well, I do not actually profess to be an artist; I have not traveled abroad either but stay at home with the little circle of people who are closest to me, since I have not found one single face to be so insignificant or so faulted that I still could not discern a more beautiful side and discover something transfigured in it. That is why, without claiming to be an artist, I am happy in the art I practice and find it satisfying." Would this not be a sign that he is indeed the artist, he who by bringing a certain something with him found right on the spot what the well-traveled artist did not find anywhere in the world—perhaps because he did not bring a certain something with him! Therefore the second of the two would be the artist. Would it not really be sad if what is intended to beautify life could only be like a curse upon it, so that, instead of making life beautiful for us, "art" only fastidiously discovered that none of us is beautiful! Would it not be even sadder, as well as even more confused, if love, too, would be only a curse because its requirement could only make it obvious that none of us is worth loving, rather than that love would be known by the very fact that it is loving enough to be able to find something lovable in all of us, that is, loving enough to be able to love all of us!

Pablo Neruda (1904–1973)  
“Poet’s Obligation”

To whoever is not listening to the sea  
this Friday morning, to whoever is cooped up  
in house or office, factory or woman  
or street or mine or harsh prison cell;  
to him I come, and, without speaking or looking,  
I arrive and open the door of his prison,  
and a vibration starts up, vague and insistent,  
a great fragment of thunder sets in motion  
the rumble of the planet and the foam,  
the raucous rivers of the ocean flood,  
the star vibrates swiftly in its corona,  
and the sea is beating, dying and continuing.

So, drawn on by my destiny,  
I ceaselessly must listen to and keep  
the sea's lamenting in my awareness,  
I must feel the crash of the hard water  
and gather it up in a perpetual cup  
so that, wherever those in prison may be,  
wherever they suffer the autumn's castigation,  
I may be there with an errant wave,  
I may move, passing through windows,  
and hearing me, eyes will glance upward  
saying "How can I reach the sea?"  
And I shall broadcast, saying nothing,  
the starry echoes of the wave,  
a breaking up of foam and quicksand,  
a rustling of salt withdrawing,  
the grey cry of the sea-birds on the coast.  
So, through me, freedom and the sea  
will make their answer to the shuttered heart.

*(Translated from the Spanish by Alastair Reid)*

Czesław Miłosz  
“Encounter” (1988)

We were riding through frozen fields in a wagon at dawn.  
A red wing rose in the darkness.

And suddenly a hare ran across the road.  
One of us pointed to it with his hand.

That was long ago. Today neither of them is alive,  
Not the hare, nor the man who made the gesture.

O my love, where are they, where are they going  
The flash of a hand, streak of movement, rustle of pebbles.  
I ask not out of sorrow, but in wonder.

*Wilno, 1936*

Richard Wilbur

“Love Calls Us to the Things of This World” (2004)

The eyes open to a cry of pulleys,  
And spirited from sleep, the astounded soul  
Hangs for a moment bodiless and simple  
As false dawn.

Outside the open window  
The morning air is all awash with angels.

Some are in bed-sheets, some are in blouses,  
Some are in smocks: but truly there they are.  
Now they are rising together in calm swells  
Of halcyon feeling, filling whatever they wear  
With the deep joy of their impersonal breathing;

Now they are flying in place, conveying  
The terrible speed of their omnipresence, moving  
And staying like white water; and now of a sudden  
They swoon down into so rapt a quiet  
That nobody seems to be there.

The soul shrinks

From all that it is about to remember,  
From the punctual rape of every blessed day,  
And cries,  
“Oh, let there be nothing on earth but laundry,  
Nothing but rosy hands in the rising steam  
And clear dances done in the sight of heaven.”

Yet, as the sun acknowledges  
With a warm look the world's hunks and colors,  
The soul descends once more in bitter love  
To accept the waking body, saying now  
In a changed voice as the man yawns and rises,  
“Bring them down from their ruddy gallows;  
Let there be clean linen for the backs of thieves;  
Let lovers go fresh and sweet to be undone,  
And the heaviest nuns walk in a pure floating  
Of dark habits,  
keeping their difficult balance.”