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Poetry Is Dead. Does Anybody Really Care?

If You're Like Me, Untangling Symbol And Allusion Seems As Irrelevant Now As It Did In High School

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It is difficult to imagine a world without movies, plays, novels and music, but a world without poems doesn't have to be imagined. I find it disturbing that no one I know has cracked open a book of poetry in decades and that I, who once spent countless hours reading contemporary poets like Lowell and Berryman, can no longer even name a living poet.

All this started to bother me when heiress Ruth Lilly made an unprecedented donation of \$100 million to Poetry Magazine in November. An article published on the Poetry International Web site said critics and poets agreed that the gift "could change the face of American poetry."

Don't these critics and poets realize that their art form is dead? Perhaps not. They probably also don't realize that people like me helped kill it.

In high school, I, like most of my classmates, hated the poetry unit in English class that surfaced annually with the same grim regularity as the gymnastics unit in physical education. Just as I was a good athlete who detested the parallel bars, I was an avid reader who despised rhymed and rhythmic writing. Plowing through tangled symbol and allusion, I wondered why the damn poets couldn't just say what they meant.

Then I went to college and at some point, I got it. Maybe it was when I was infatuated with some girl and read "I Knew a Woman" by Theodore Roethke: "I knew a woman, lovely in her bones/When small birds sighed, she would sigh back at them." Or maybe it happened when I read Keats's odes or Eliot's "Prufrock" or that haunting line in Frost: "I have been one acquainted with the night." For the next 10 years or so, I was hooked. I read poetry, wrote it and recited verse to impress dates.

And then my interest waned. On the surface, I suppose it was because I had other interests that demanded my time and attention: I got married, had children, pursued my career, bought a house. With apologies to Frost, I began to find more relevance in articles about interest rates than essays on the sprung rhythm of Hopkins.

Society, too, was changing in a way that did not favor the reading of poetry. From the Me Generation of the '70s to the get-rich-quick '80s, our culture became intensely prosaic. Ambiguity, complexity and paradox fell out of favor. We embraced easily defined goals and crystal-clear communication (Ronald Reagan was president, presiding over the literalization of America). Fewer politicians seemed to quote contemporary poets in speeches, and the relatively small number of name-brand, living American poets died or faded from view.

By the '90s, it was all over. If you doubt this statement, consider that poetry is the only art form where the number of people creating it is far greater than the number of people appreciating it. Anyone can write a bad poem. To appreciate a good one, though, takes knowledge and commitment. As a society, we lack this knowledge and commitment. People don't possess the patience to read a poem 20 times before the sound and sense of it takes hold. They aren't willing

to let the words wash over them like a wave, demanding instead for the meaning to flow clearly and quickly. They want narrative-driven forms, stand-alone art that doesn't require an understanding of the larger context.

I, too, want these things. I am part of a world that apotheosizes the trendy, and poetry is just about as untrendy as it gets. I want to read books with buzz--in part because I make my living as a ghostwriter of and collaborator on books--and I can't remember the last book of poetry that created even a dying mosquito's worth of hum. I am also lazy, and poetry takes work.

In my worst moments, I blame the usual suspects for my own failings: the mainstream media, the Internet, the fast-food mentality. If it weren't for the pernicious influence of blah, blah, blah... Ultimately, though, there's no one to blame. Poetry is designed for an era when people valued the written word and had the time and inclination to possess it in its highest form.

I really do believe that poetry is the highest form of writing. Read Yeats's "The Wild Swans at Coole," Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," Thomas's "Fern Hill," and you'll experience the true power of art. They touch the heart and the head in ways that movie-makers (our current artistic high priests) can only dream of.

April was National Poetry Month, a fact I know only because it was noted in my younger daughter's school newsletter. I celebrated by finding out the name of our poet laureate (Billy Collins) and reading one of his poems. This may not seem like much, but I have television shows to watch, best sellers to read and Web sites to visit before I sleep.

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