

Ethical Criticism and Models of U.S. Poetry

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Abstract Every culture and period present certain models or expectations about what a poetic text is supposed to be and convey. For Homer it had to be a story of adventure and war, for Sappho the expression of personal sentiment and love, for the authors of the Bible's prophetic books, stern moral reflection. In the USA poetry has mostly been about the expression of self, generally in a didactic mood. Whitman wrote a very long "Song of Myself" telling us how he sees the world and how we should see it. I will glance at several poets to ascertain which models of poetry they practice, and in particular consider Wallace Stevens, who mostly avoids didacticism and established modes of poetic communication, and discuss in what ways his unpredictable writing and "essential gaudiness" (as he called it) respond to ethical concerns.

Key words Poetry; United States; translation; Ethical Criticism

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There is a tradition of didactic and gnomic writing to be found in all cultures. Proverbs, for example, fall into this category. So apparently do ancient Chinese works like many compositions in the Confucian *Classic of Poetry* 詩經. For example, poem 206 of this ancient collection reads in Arthur Waley's 20th-century translation (1937):

無將大車 - Wu Jiang Da Che

無將大車、祇自塵兮。

無思百憂、祇自疢兮。

無將大車、維塵冥冥。

無思百憂、不出于頹。

無將大車、維塵離兮。

無思百憂、祇自重兮。

THE BIG CHARIOT

Don't help-on the big chariot;

You will only make yourself dusty.

Don't think about the sorrows of the world;

You will only make yourself wretched.

Don't help-on the big chariot;

You won't be able to see for dust.

Don't think about the sorrows of the world;

Or you will never escape from your despair. (Waley 34)

And so on for a third quatrain or four-line stanza. The American poet Ezra Pound also translated this poem as part of his complete translation *The Confucian Odes* (1954). He tried to reproduce the rhymes of the original (No. 206):

Let the Great Cart alone,

'ware dust. [*i.e.*, beware dust]

Think not of sorrows

lest thy heart rust.

Push no great cart

lest dust enflame thine eye,
 brood not on sorrows
 lest joy pass by.

Push not the great wheel-spoke in moil and sweat
 lest thou make thy troubles
 heavier yet. (Pound 122)

Since the original is presumably folk-poetry, Pound attempts to simplify and make archaic the language. The result is puzzling, somewhat artificial. Waley is more straightforward and doesn't seek to force or make the original his own.

So here we have a kind of moral and metaphorical saying, 無將大車, set in rhyming and rhythmical language, and two attempts to convey meaning and form to English and American readers. Pound and Waley respond to two different *models* of poetry, one more traditional and unassuming, one more experimental and disruptive. Pound's translation calls attention to itself, Waley seeks to lead us in the neighborhood of the original text without too much interference.

Translations are in fact a very helpful guide to models of poetry current or coexistent at the time of their production. This is especially true for ancient texts (like the Chinese *Classic of Poetry*) of which vastly different renderings are possible. The Waley and Pound texts tell us a lot about the personalities of their authors, and are enough to suggest why Pound remains a towering if controversial figure of 20th-century literature, while the excellent Waley is remembered if at all as an important translator from the Chinese and Japanese (his translation of the *Book of Genji* in a style reminiscent of Marcel Proust remains a classic). Views of an ancient text may differ radically. This is possibly not the case with Waley and Pound, who only disagree about how best to render the rhythm and diction of the original.

For another example, in Russia translators are traditionally required to rhyme when translating rhymed poems. (Rhyme is still much used at present in original Russian verse.) So a translation like Waley's would be unacceptable, while Pound's would be admired.

This also applies to translations of modern poetry. For example, the American Emily Dickinson mostly used quatrains with rhymes in the second and fourth line:

I died for Beauty – but was scarce
 Adjusted in the Tomb

When One who died for Truth, was lain
In an adjoining Room – (Poem 449, Johnson 216)

Thus begins a strange story, told with characteristic directness. Or, to quote a Dickinson instance of gnomic utterance:

Summer is shorter than any one –
Life is shorter than Summer –
Seventy Years is spent as quick
As an only Dollar – (Poem 1506, Johnson 633)

This is followed by another stanza. Dickinson, by the way, lived rather less than seventy years, dying at fifty-six. A Russian translator like the able poet Grigory Krushkov would and must render these quatrains providing rhymes for lines 2 and 4 in each stanza. (Dickinson is famous for her off-rhymes: *tomb/room* and *summer/dollar* are far from perfect rhymes.)

In Italy, on the other hand, as well as in France and probably Germany, rhyme has long gone out of fashion, and is only used for special effect by major poets (like Eugenio Montale, Italian recipient of the 1975 Nobel Prize for Literature). That is, most notable poetry, or poetry recognized as such (which is an interesting distinction), rhymes irregularly if at all. As a consequence, translations of rhymed originals in Italian, be it Shakespeare's *Sonnets* or Molière's plays, are nearly always unrhymed.

Thus my own translation of Dickinson into Italian only uses rhyme and assonance occasionally. For example, the two quatrains cited above read as translated by me:

Morii per la bellezza – ma ero appena
abituata alla tomba
che una che morì per la verità fu deposta
in una stanza attigua – (Bacigalupo 167)

L'estate è più corta di tutto –
la vita è più corta dell'estate –
settant'anni sono spesi in fretta
come un dollaro solitario – (Bacigalupo 399)

There are no real rhymes, though perhaps one can detect assonance (*tomba/attigua, tutto/fretta*). And you will also notice that words capitalized by Dickinson (Truth, Beauty, etc.) appear in Italian in lower case. This again has to do with different linguistic and poetic models. Twentieth-century Italian literature is, generally speaking, less rhetorical and flowery than the writing in earlier periods. It speaks less loudly, *sottovoce*, as we say in Italy. Thus capital letters are no longer used, just as in modern English. It would be untrue to Dickinson's astute humor to use emphatic capital letters in the translation. Hence the apparent graphic discrepancy, or unfaithfulness to the original, seeks to better reproduce the text's tone and intention for the sensibility of a contemporary Italian reader. Dickinson speaks simply and we recognize in her a fellow-soul. This is the reason for her extraordinary posthumous success: she may well be the most widely read poet in the West.

Didactic poetry has similar characteristics over different cultures and times. It makes general statements about the human condition and teaches by direct instruction or example. The two Dickinson quatrains are instances of these two aspects. The instructive mode clearly links Dickinson's statement to so ancient a text as the poem about the Great Chariot quoted earlier (無將大車). The Chinese poet tells us:

Don't help-on the big chariot;
You will only make yourself dusty.
Don't think about the sorrows of the world;
You will only make yourself wretched. (Waley 34)

Dickinson makes a statement about the brevity of life, with wonderful use of parallelism, inversion and simile:

Summer is shorter than any one –
Life is shorter than Summer –
Seventy Years is spent as quick
As an only Dollar – (Johnson 633)

In fact, the simile or metaphor of the "only Dollar" spent as quickly as life can be compared to the metaphor of the "big chariot" that doesn't need to be pushed by us. And it is really fascinating to note how in both poems two lines are devoted to the metaphor and two to the application. Is this an example and proof of the universal

constants of poetic language? Possibly. Perhaps it has to do with the very nature of language, in which repetition of phrase-structures is essential. In poetry this expedient becomes a conscious means of communication. It is to some extent all about repetition — rhyme, verse-length, strophe.

Thus we have Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, which of course Dickinson studied, and which are a triumph of technique and creativity. This great series very often uses the didactic mode (and the final couplets have often gnomic or proverbial form). It tells the "fair youth" to which many of the poems are addressed that he should marry in order that his beauty may not die as he ages, but then Shakespeare tells him and us that, whether or not he have descendents, he will live forever in these very sonnets:

So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee. (Sonnet 18, Vendler 119)

Shakespeare's rhetorical claim (partly derived from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 15.871-79) has been made good by history: in fact Sonnet 18 still "lives," since millions of English speakers have been and are familiar with it. And by way of Sonnet 18 the Fair Youth, whoever he was, continues to "live." Perhaps he is a metaphor for the power and creativity of language as such, and of the human mind. A metaphor of poetry itself, which lives in the abstract when we speak of it but is really only perceptible through particular memorable and supreme texts, like some of the ones I have been citing.

The *Sonnets* also contain straightforward moral reflection, like the famous poem about lust, "The expense of spirit in a waste of shame," where sexual passion and pleasure are presented as destructive, maddening and short-lived (Shakespeare in fact wrote a play about the disastrous union of Antony and Cleopatra). The gnomic conclusion reads:

All this the world well knows yet none knows well
To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell. (Sonnet 129, Vendler 549)

The dangers of passion have been magnificently described, but there is no rescuing mankind from its contradictory condition, where heaven and hell are always changing places, just as they do in the final alliterative line. We "know" but we do not know, luckily perhaps, since if we knew too much we would not be alive and kicking.

In America there has always been a particular richness of didactic writing, given the moral foundations of the Puritan colonies. In 17th-century captivity narratives women abducted by Native Americans tell in graphic detail the history of their sufferings to show how God has punished them for their lapses and helped them to overcome tremendous hardship. Memoir and moral go together.

Later, in the 19th century, Dickinson still writes in a Christian context, though she is much more questioning about God's alleged justice and asks him why so many terrible things happen to good people, in the Bible as in life. Life to her is mysterious, agonizing and fulfilling.

Dickinson's near-contemporary Walt Whitman is less concerned with Christianity, and preaches and practices a religion of the people. His change of perspective is accompanied by a change in the model of poetry: no rhymes, free verse, a chaotic abundance in response to the brave new American world. But his poetry remains essentially moral and didactic, through personal example, metaphor, description, etc.

In the 20th century, T. S. Eliot creates novel models of poetry, with irregular and often ironic rhymes, and joins Dickinson's astute and critical Christianity with Whitman's universality. His work — *The Waste Land* and the more explicitly didactic *Four Quartets* — seeks to provide modern man with an all-embracing vision in which, despite personal uncertainty and historical tragedy, he can believe and find a point of arrival:

A condition of complete simplicity
(Costing not less than everything)
And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well (*Little Gidding*, Eliot 223)

Eliot's great forerunner is the Italian medieval poet Dante, the creator of an all-embracing didactic vision (the *Divine Comedy*) which Eliot seeks to emulate in an age of skepticism and disbelief, reaffirming the centrality of Christianity at a distance of six centuries. But perhaps in Eliot religion has become (as in Shakespeare) one with poetic expression and vision: it is not a set of beliefs beyond the world of the text and beyond the language and history of which it is a product and summation.

There is little doubt that the writings discussed so far address ethical concerns, howbeit in an imaginative way, and thus are particularly responsive to ethical criticism. It would be reductive to read them simply for their moral content, and

in fact ethical criticism must tell us if and how moral impulses are represented successfully (if at all). Shakespeare's sonnet on the inescapable (im)morality of lust is a wonderful example of a full awareness of moral complexity that criticism must point out. Shakespeare is always very hard to pin down to a single position, since his writing exists within movement and change, as dramatic speech in a given or imaginary situation. It is an utterance of the moment that defies time — one of his paradoxes.

But what of writing that has no explicit didactic content? Lyric writing from ancient time, expressing love, jealousy, anguish, etc., touches us through passion and art, the expression of a profound desire for love or security, a desire which may even create its object. Music is a good example here, for it has no explicit content, ethical or other, only form expressive of emotion — and of its own mastery and complexity. And yet listening to great music is a fundamental moral-aesthetic experience that has the power to penetrate through a person's entire life and give it meaning and purpose.

The conductor and pianist Daniel Barenboim has pointed out that music provides profound insights into reality while at the same time apparently allowing the listener to escape everyday concerns. Through music, he says,

you learn many things about the world, about nature, about human beings and human relations. And therefore it is, in many ways, the best school for life, really. And yet, at the same time, it is a means of escape from the world. And it is with this duality of music that we come to the paradox. How is it possible that something that can teach you so much about the world, about nature and the universe, and, for more religious people, about God — that something that is so clearly able to teach you so many things can serve as a means of escape from precisely those things? (Barenboim and Said 122)

Barenboim's description of the dual effect of music is useful if we consider a major and elusive 20th-century American poet, Wallace Stevens. He was brought up as a Presbyterian Christian but early on discarded traditional belief and said he was going to write "pure poetry" — though he often responded to current historical situations (the politics of the 1930s, the two world wars), and he famously said that the purpose of poetry was to "help us to live our lives" (*Necessary Angel* 36) — which is what music does according to Barenboim.

Stevens's poems are mostly written in pellucid language and forms but are often impenetrable as to meaning, or at least do not lend themselves to paraphrase.

Thus he developed a new *model* for modern poetry, which joins abstract statement and image, complexity and simplicity. A famous early poem, “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” clearly owes much to Chinese and Japanese poetry and painting. (As well as to the European avant-garde — Futurism, Imagism, Cubism, etc.) This is the first of the thirteen short stanzas (all in free verse): “Among twenty snowy mountains, / The only moving thing / Was the eye of the blackbird” (*Collected Poems* 92). It is pictorial, though one may gather meaning from it. There is a Buddhist saying: “You yourself are the one who creates this world in every moment.” Stevens must have believed this, because a later poem, “Wild Ducks, People and Distances,” begins as follows: “The life of the world depends on that he is / Alive, on that people are alive, on that / There is village and village of them . . .” (*Collected Poems* 328). These statements are didactic, though somewhat ambiguous.

Stevens is a poet of statement; he often uses the imperative, but alternates this with the quasi-proverbial expression of a general truth (mostly counterintuitive, i.e., paradoxical). This happens for example in another much anthologized poem “The Emperor of Ice-Cream,” which begins with instructions on how to make (or get someone to make) ice-cream: “Call the roller of big cigars, / The muscular one, and bid him whip / In kitchen cups concupiscent curds.” The first stanza closes with the memorable couplet: “Let be be finale of seem. / The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream” (*Collected Poems* 64). The general statement emerges unexpectedly and strangely. We are challenged to paraphrase it: let being be the end of seeming, let seeming cease and reveal being. But perhaps it could also be read to mean that the “finale” of being is seeming: all that counts is appearance. It is again ambiguous music, gnomic didacticism contradicting itself. Probably the import is rather similar to the ancient Chinese song’s “Don’t think about the sorrows of the world” (Waley 34).

Stevens wrote poetry according to a model that remains mysterious yet deeply fulfilling. Early critics described him as a “dandy,” that is, as supremely elegant and possibly frivolous. However, he treats of essential ethical questions in his puzzling and rewarding way. So ethical criticism could point out that Stevens provides examples of a creative approach to life and always (as all major poetry) asks the reader to perform a similar creative gesture. Where there was chaos there is form, always to be discovered. And so the world is created by art (perception) and revealed as meaningful. And at the same time we are liberated from mundane constraints, we are more deeply involved yet removed from actuality and its discontents. Another poem, “The Ordinary Women,” describes somewhat ironically

this very process:

Then from their poverty they rose,
From dry catarrhs, and to guitars,
They flitted
Through the palace walls. (*Collected Poems* 20)

It's an everyday liberation, leading the "ordinary women" into the music hall or the movie theater. And into the realm of words, rhythms and rhymes. *Catarrhs* and *guitars* rhyme but are very different matters, in a way opposites. This, by the way, is only the first of nine stanzas of this playful yet serious and even compassionate poem.

I conclude that in the hands of a master poet-composer even an apparently trivial and frivolous composition works as an ethical model for being in full possession of one's wits and senses, at one with the world and liberated. Man is revealed as an incessant creator of forms and the reader is recalled to a fuller perception of his or her condition and power.

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