

PROJECT PAPERS

Volume II © 1989 The Poetry Project, Ltd. St. Mark's Church 2nd Ave. & 10th St. New York, New York 10003

LORENZO THOMAS

I CUDDA HAD A V-8: POETRY AND THE VERNACULAR

A lecture delivered on April 7, 1988 as part of the Poetry Project's 1988 Symposium,
Poetry of Everyday Life

Let me begin with an optimistic observation. All discourse is intentional and premeditated. We cannot "stop to think" — we're always thinking — even if circumstances sometimes impinge upon our judgement and our utterances, therefore, betray poor thinking.

"Talk fast" and "Think before you speak" are parallel guidelines that usually result in flashy blunders of candor or solicited lies. Perhaps we are considering events transacted in nanoseconds, but I insist that almost all human activity is premeditated.

Poetry, as we all know, is an often effective remedy for the sometimes life-threatening, ailment of spontaneous speech. Poetry is formulaic language, a cure for blurting. Whenever poetic speech pretends to be vernacular language it does so with the power of all deliberate artifice and a disclaimer should flash across the screen of your brain and be imprinted in the wax of your ears. Just to digress, I must mention my favorite disclaimer from a sleazy TV station in Houston. The chiron print on screen and the voice-over tells us, in properly solemn tones, "The following program may be unsuitable for many viewers; discretion is advised." Talk about industrial-strength premeditation! You knows, I gots to watch *that* movie!

But, as Max Shulman once said, I digress. Actually, Max Shulman said that thousands of times. But, I digress; I'm really supposed to talk about our topic: "The Poetry Of Everyday Life."

The relationship between poetic diction and the vernacular utterances of everyday life is adversarial and parasitic in both directions. Poets become poets because we, this happy breed, have — through dint of genius — figured out an alternative to the "Shucks, I cudda had a V-8" syndrome.

We live in an age of growing illiteracy in a nation determined to destroy regional dialects and accents and impose a bland least-common-denominator "standard," "broadcast," or "edited" American-English on its inhabitants. Curiously, "English as an official language" is the project of a political regime that prates about a philosophy of government decentralization and non-intrusion into citizens' lives. In any case, I am here to say that poetry is *not* and cannot be vernacular expression.

No matter what it may pretend to be — and *pretend* is the signal word — poetry is, by definition, heightened speech. It is the stuff of dreams and nightmares, not dimly unpremeditated slips-of-tongue around the water-cooler. When poetry attempts to depict "everyday life" it is either *ventriloquy* (and often ironic) or *documentary* (and usually polemical and satiric). Quite often, poets who attempt to

“capture the language of the people” think of the people as “fair game.” Of course, such poets — basking in their own sense of personal superiority — have nothing but good intentions. William Blake, I think, told us where that road leads.

Once you have learned it, condescension is a hard habit to break. Poets can deal with “everyday life” by spilling their guts. But who, in his or her right mind, would do that? What’s left is the poet as commentator and here is the real problem. The *depiction* of “everyday life,” whether innocently accurate or polemically — if not mendaciously — manipulative, can only be the most formal and artificial enterprise on this planet. In fact, however, our own “dailiness” is a very studied practice of premeditated artifice.

Erving Goffman’s notion, in *Presentation Of Self In Everyday Life* (1959) that life for each of us is really nothing more than a skillful verbal performance, is buttressed by Juergen Ruesch and the poet Weldon Kees in their extraordinary book *Non-Verbal Communication* (1956) where it becomes apparent that we consistently order our physical environments in ways that create “stage sets” for our verbal performances.

Poetry that attempts to depict “everyday life” is really a critical examination of (1) the relationship of candor and premeditated performance, (2) traditions of discourse, and (3) where you live. Williams’ *Paterson* and Pound’s *Cantos* approach dailiness in a polar relationship. One man’s ephemera is another man’s civilization. Yet both Pound and Williams, to many of us, are old fogies rummaging in attics: and “everyday life” to some folks is the possible visit to Attica.

Once again, Amiri Baraka pointed out long ago that “the view from the bottom of the hill” is not the same as the view from the top, but that those at the bottom had been sold on the concept that “God don’t ever change.” Right or wrong, that really doesn’t matter. What does matter is understanding that, in this country, “everyday life” depends on who you are and where you really live. “English as our official language” aside, dailiness is various and if poetry can do anything about it, it is to document and celebrate the variety of the American quotidian. Gwendolyn Brooks’ “The Bean Eaters” and Wallace Stevens’ “Sunday Morning” will illustrate my point. From “Sunday Morning”:

Complacencies of the peignoir, and late
Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,
And the green freedom of a cockatoo
Upon a rug mingle to dissipate
The holy hush of ancient sacrifice.
She dreams a little, and she feels the dark
Encroachment of that old catastrophe,
As a calm darkens among water-lights....

And, Gwendolyn Brooks’ “The Bean Eaters”:

They eat beans mostly, this old yellow pair
Dinner is a casual affair.
Plain chipware on a plain and creaking wood,
Tin flatware.

Two who are Mostly Good.
Two who have lived their day,
But keep on putting on their clothes
And putting things away.

And remembering...
Remembering, with twinklings and twinges,
As they lean over the beans in their rented back room that is full
of beads and receipts and dolls and cloths, tobacco crumbs, vases and fringes.

Clearly, these are carefully premeditated utterances intended to produce very specific responses. When the Panamanian poet Roberto McKay tells us that “the poet’s business is telling the truth,” he also alerts us to the fact that the poet has also carefully decided what “the truth” is and has constructed a discourse that will, the poet hopes, effectively convince readers to believe what we are told. Elliot Abrams is not as good at this stuff as McKay is, but you understand what I’m talking about. Premeditation.

The problem facing any poet who pretends to be expressive in vernacular language about quotidian concerns is the possibility that readers will be offended by artifice. The fact is that almost all “poetry of everyday life” is written, quite properly, in highly stylized poetic language. If vernacular speech has any poetic eloquence, that eloquence is almost accidental. I was talking to a wonderful folklorist and writer, Bill Brett, from Hull, Texas, and he was telling me about the phrases used in the Oil Patch by the rough-necks, the drillers, and he mentioned a phrase that they call “suitcase sand” which is what they describe a dry hole as. They’d say “What was that on your rig.” And they’d answer, “Well, we hit suitcase sand yesterday.” And I said “Oh Bill that’s so poetic and metaphoric.” And he said, “Well that’s just illiterate people trying to explain things the best way they could.”

The truth is, we only appreciate the portraits of our daily lives when they are — through the poet’s or painter’s training in artifice — better than our own carefully premeditated, but often flawed presentations (or, sadly, “renderings”) of self. We love it when we listen to ourselves talking about ourselves and don’t have to cringe because someone (consider Donohue, or Ellease Southerland, Eudora Welty, John Ashbery, or Oprah Winfrey — with the skill of their ventriloquy) has made us know that there are other options in understanding our lives than the phrase of another gifted poet who gave us, “Damn, I cudda had a V-8!”

“The thing about novels,” Alice Notley wrote in *Margaret & Dusty* (1985), “aren’t the characters / better than / ourselves?” Of course they are; but that is what I mean. Vern, y’know what I mean?