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Beyond the Inward Light: The Quaker Poet in Community

by William Jolliff

It's a privilege to be granted a chance to address a gathering like this: a room full of people whose Quaker way of life and thought are so very central to their work that they spend time and resources to get together and talk about it. We've been blessed with a common gift, and it isn't a small one.

That said, I suspect I'm not the only one here who sometimes wonders how, or even if, what I do matters. Yet even among you, my group of fellow self-doubters, I must lobby for my own elevated position: as a poet and a teacher of poetry writing, I have the privilege of practicing the discipline *most* often used to exemplify the frivolous.

That I don't accept the characterization of poetry as *frivolous* should go without saying, though sometimes in discussions I can do little more than bite my lip and try to recall the words of William Carlos Williams:

> It is difficult
> to get the news from poems
> yet men die miserably every day
> for lack
> of what is found there.

More than once, I've counseled with students or prospective students who feel a pull toward something in my field, scholarly or artistic, but who simultaneously suspect that they might be better paid—or of better service—feeding the hungry, healing the sick, creating a new Smartphone application,

running for public office, or sailing off to the hinterlands to carry the Gospel. All good things, of course. And I readily admit that for many or nearly all students, those avenues of service might be better.

If, however, you'll grant me for the next fifty minutes the possibility that poetry matters, what I want to address today is a more focused question: What is the role of a *Quaker* poet? Historically, Quakers have never been champions of the frivolous, but I am asking that question anyway. And, because I think our lives are inevitably lived out among others, What is the role of the Quaker poet in community? I'll even parse that question further: How does a Quaker poet do good and Friendly service in the place where he or she is situated—using the word *situated* in both the inner and outer sense, the spiritual and physical?

Some of you are poets; more of you are not. For those of you who are not poets, this talk may well be tedious. But it's possible that the trajectory I take will find a parallel in your own field. I'll trust that you can make the analogical leap without too much of my help, since in all likelihood I couldn't give it, anyway.

If I make any more disclaimers, you'll assume this is a meeting of worship for business and slip off to the meeting house kitchen, so I'd best get on with the work at hand:

What is the role of the Quaker poet in community?

I am enough of a traditional, dyed-in-the-wool academic to begin my exploration by leaning hard toward the problem, putting my shoulder firmly to the wheel, and focusing my best line of sight squarely backwards.

I'll begin, Friends, with Whittier.

I doubt that it ever occurred to the *poet* John Greenleaf Whittier that his work didn't matter—any more than it did to the *political lobbyist* Whittier or the *journeyman journalist* Whittier. For the simple reason that it so clearly did matter.

Whittier was, after all, the great abolitionist poet. When he felt the call of God—as delivered by God's proxy, William Lloyd Garrison—to leave behind his life as an opportunistic journalist and give himself over to the cause of the slave, it did not occur to him to leave behind the craft he dreamed might make him an American version of Robert Burns. By God's/Garrison's decree, Whittier carried his poetry with him into the greater community, the public argument, as his most important persuasive tool; and not only did it go with him but, as I have argued elsewhere, the gift, and the drive to exercise that gift, was intensified (Jolliff 17-20).

It's difficult for us to think of using poetry as a way of influencing popular thought. Indeed, the reasons for Whittier's maintaining his poetic craft become clear only if we understand his calling in its historical, cultural context.

In his day, there was nothing frivolous about the influence of poetry. To begin, poetry was a popular art form. Regular people read regular poetry. Regular everyday newspapers had poetry pages. And when regular people read regular poetry in the regular columns of their regular newspapers, they expected it to be about something that would pertain to them: tales of lost love and sentimental celebrations of hearth and home were versified, of course, but poetry also had a place as informed opinion on the most pressing issues of the times.

Now it was as natural for a nineteenth-century citizen to read the poetry page of the local paper as it is for you and me to get in the car and click on the radio.

And when we turn on the radio, we very likely do not struggle, at least very much, to discern what the newscaster means or what the songs we listen to mean. The newscaster's script is written to be readily understood by anyone, and the songwriter's lyrics likewise. Beyond a basic education, it was not necessary in Whittier's day to have specialized training to read a poem any more than it demands of us specialized training to grasp the content and intention of our own media personalities, folks like Rush Limbaugh or Brian Williams or Taylor Swift.

So if 160 years ago you had picked up *The National Era* or *The Liberator* or many other papers and turned to a Whittier poem, you would have understood it perfectly well. That's what his poetry was written for: to be understood. It was art, yes, but art for popular consumption—and more. And it is indeed likely that you would have seen a Whittier poem. Because even though he might have been publishing his poems in various minor local and regional papers, that was not the range of a poem's life. Here's why.

Nineteenth-century newspapers had *exchange* desks. Newspaper editors purchased or exchanged subscriptions with other editors, and they used the other papers' published material freely. That was not plagiarism; it was accepted practice. So a Whittier poem might appear in a little paper in Hartford or Amesbury, then find itself exchanged with a paper in Boston, then exchanged with a paper in New York, then exchanged with papers in Washington, DC, or Atlanta or Cincinnati, so that instead of having a few hundred readers or a few thousand, that poem might potentially have a few hundred thousand. Therefore, if some activist had a concern—the horrific plight of the slave, for example—to take to the masses, as hard as it may be to believe today, poetry

might well have been a perfectly functional, expedient avenue to reach the broadest community.

Now this is something you must keep clear: in seeking a contemporary cultural comparison with Whittier, you shouldn't think in terms of Whittier as parallel to Li Young Lee or Charles Wright or even Ted Kooser; yes, they are great poets of our day, but they are, from any pop cultural standpoint, utterly obscure. That was not Whittier. Think *Springsteen*. Think *Bono*. Think—and why not?—*Miley Cyrus*.

My point is that he had a huge potential audience for his abolitionist poetry. A huge audience. A great potential for Friendly ministry through poetry. The culture at large read Whittier's poems just as people now listen to sad songs and love songs and talk radio, just as they click open the *Times* and read the op-ed page!

Poetry today is in a different position. The function once held by poetry in popular culture is now filled by other art forms, other media. The gratifications poetry has always offered persist, but in very different forms. The long rhythmic narratives that Whittier and his kin saw as their real contribution long ago gave way first to the novel, then to films, and now to whatever new binge-ready series Netflix offers. The lyrical love poems of Whittier and his kin have been displaced by popular song. The political commentary of Whittier and his kin now falls within the pale of Bill O'Reilly or Amy Goodman or whatever talking head the pharmaceutical giants and their networks deem worthy—worthy to tell the national tale and sell their Cialis.

Poetry and Media

Since the avenue of poetry as a broadly circulating popular medium is gone, today's Quaker poets must rethink, radically rethink, the role of their work in their communities. The popular community does not exist for the twenty-first-century Whittier. So as poets, as Quaker poets, as champions of the frivolous in plain coats, where do we minister? How do we minister? What communities might we serve? We need to reconsider many questions, the most obvious being scale.

Thankfully, poetry does maintain one other little niche or ten in our culture. I'll offer you three, with no intention of being comprehensive.

Niche #1: Let's start with self-discovery, the examined life. Such helping folks as school teachers, spiritual directors, and the occasional counseling psychologist may still direct their students or clients to write out their feelings in poetry. Contemporary free verse, with its apparent lack of hard-wrought craft, especially lends itself to such outpourings, and these are good. But they

aren't, for the most part, anything anyone else would want to read. They perform a helpful and necessary function for the growth of the individual, and maybe the act of expression itself can be a kind of witness; but generally these "poems" find that their best or only audience is an audience of one, maybe, maybe two. How might a Quaker minister in such community settings?

Very well, I believe. I'd even say it's right up our Friendly alley. As teachers who help students find a voice for dreams and fears, as spiritual directors who help directees look closely at their own souls, as counselors who help clients make sense of their past, their present, and their full human potential, a Quaker way of walking through the world can readily find opportunity for ministry. The Friendly potential for doing good in such contexts—and maybe that's what I mean by the Quaker's place in community—is clear.

I assure you that it is not an easy, natural thing for most people to let their deepest feelings, their darkest memories, fall unmediated into words; and the Quaker teacher, spiritual director, or counselor who is skilled in the powers of poetic discovery can be a Friendly paraclete who helps that happen. The poetic *craft* in such contexts comes in as we learn for ourselves and teach others the invention skills, the exploratory methods, the powers of figurative comparison, the surprising recognitions in narrative form, even the places of non-judgmental expression—those techniques that make the way open for everyday miracles. So that's one potential place for ministry.

Niche #2: Now let's jump to the opposite end of the spectrum: the enduring place of poetry in the world of what I will crudely call high art. When poetry ceased to be a popular form, when it became the stuff of artistic specialists, its forms changed utterly. What may seem to the uninitiated like craftless expression is, in fact, often following complex sets of principles, a challenging prosody that would never have been conceived by Whittier or Longfellow or, dare I say it, Shakespeare. In the context of high art, there has never been a time when poets were more obsessed with the challenges of form. The result is that high art poetry is now the stuff of universities, of devotees with developed tastes for specialized art, and of course other poets. High art indeed! Much of it is intensely difficult, even off-puttingly so.

Poetry has gone the way of the other high arts, but it's gone further and it's traveling without much of a trust fund.

Let me add, however, one more complicating factor: with the displacement of traditional Anglo-American prosody and poetic forms by free verse, the most easily accessible and immediately gratifying aspects of poetic craft have fallen away. What high art contemporary poetry has gained in sophistication it has lost in accessibility. Just as it's easier for most people to find gratification in

the works of Thomas Hart Benton than in those of Jackson Pollock, it's easier to discern and find pleasure in the craft of William Shakespeare than William Stafford, easier to find pleasure in the work of John Donne than of John Ashbery. Again, that isn't bad, and it isn't good. It simply is.

How does the Quaker poet find a way to contribute to, to minister in, that high art community?

The answer here is rather straightforward: If serious poetry is your gift or passion, you simply do your art and earn your place in that community. The Quaker poet can and should have a role in that world, practicing her craft with excellence and rigor just as a Quaker painter or sculptor or novelist or composer practices her craft with rigorous expertise. And ideally, the foundational noetic constructs of that poet or painter are informed by Quaker ways of being in the world. Even with accomplishment and professional success, one's audience is inevitably small, the community served will be small; but that doesn't mean that the art doesn't have weight, that it doesn't have cultural significance.

Niche #3: Let me suggest a third kind of community that can be served by the Quaker poet: what I'll call the remnant of a popular audience. When poetry is published by *Sojourners* or *Christian Century* or our own *Friends Journal*—or on the back of your monthly meeting's worship folder—the editors are, knowingly or unknowingly, banking on the fact that some poetry may still be enjoyed, may still be edifying for an audience that is not exactly the high art audience of the literary arts journal. They are banking on the fact that just as some of us go *occasionally* to a gallery or symphony, some of us *occasionally* read poetry. The readers in the remnant may be few, the readers who benefit by the ministry of the poem may be fewer yet, but that certainly doesn't mean the ministry shouldn't be performed in, offered to, such a community.

What the poet must keep in mind for successful ministry in this remnant community, however, is that the readers must be able to access and be gratified by, at least after a reading or two or three, what the poem offers. That means, it seems to me, that the poem must be something more craft-rich than therapy; and at the same time, it must be more accessible than what one might offer in a more rigorously craft-intensive form of high art.

The Role of the Poet

Trying to discover my own potential role as a poet in each of these communities, if indeed I am to have one, as a Quaker and as a poet who works in a not-very-accessible contemporary style, has led me to do some good amount of soul-searching around the question of what I have to offer of

myself, what I have to offer the artistic community, and what I have to offer a somewhat broader, if rather small audience; and most of all, to consider how my Quaker way of walking through the world can inform my own thought and work.

I have to ask (1) which elements of my contemporary poetic craft might aid the soul-searcher who learns personal expression as a way of growth, (2) which elements of my craft might be developed by the best artistic craft of the day as practiced by those in the high art community, and (3) which elements of my craft might remain sufficiently accessible to allow a worthy pay-off for the remnant, what we might risk calling a general readership. And how may I practice this in a contemporary mode, the formal aspects of which are tremendously and simultaneously difficult and subtle?

As I have struggled with these tasks, with these three communities, I've found, ironically maybe, that the various ultimata they present may all be compressed into that very same question every free-verse poet has fielded from some well meaning student or reader or listener:

What makes that stuff you do poetry?

"I get 'Gunga Din,'" the question goes, "now buddy, that's poetry. But what's with so much depending on that red wheel barrow glazed with rain beside the white chickens?"

And in fact, that's a question I've been asking myself for nearly fifty years.

Having tired of asking it and being asked, I have decided to answer it, for good or ill. As it happens, I think my answers come from a place where my Quakerism and my craft converge. Those of you who are poets may well here see me as having let my despair turn into prescriptive dogmatism. But those of you who are not poets may be about to encounter the first understandable answer you've ever heard—take that as one of the blessings of reductionism.

I'm going to spend my remaining minutes, then, offering the Poetry Gospel according to St. William: my answer to the question, What makes a free verse poem a poem?

I will preface my answer by saying that poetry is *spiritual*. There, I've said it. In spite of the fact that spiritual seeking has been my most important concern for half a century, I learned early on as an academic never to use the word *spiritual*. If you work in a university environment, you soon learn that even among religious academics, questions of spirituality are often brushed courteously or discourteously aside, not because they are unimportant but because such questions don't lend themselves to the ways of knowing most current in academe.

These days, however, I'm trying to let myself be a little more open, a little more crass, a little more ruthless, a little more free with spiritual language. And here's why: I need it. I've come to the conclusion that poetry, and much of literature, maybe much of what we study in all the arts and sciences, can't really be discussed intelligently and rigorously if one whole aspect of what it means to be human is bracketed off, relegated to other, lesser arenas, ghetto-ized to religious institutions, coffee shops, or the silence of one's own room.

Even as you hear this, I suspect that some of you may be getting uncomfortable with the direction my discussion is going: if so, your teachers have trained you well!

So let me assure you that this isn't where I try to sign you up for a crusade or a *jihad*, ask you to disrobe, or even to hold your pen in a magical way and hum "OOOOMMMM" (though you may do all three if you wish). When I use the word *spiritual* in the moments to come, what I'm referring to, more or less, are those elements of our shared human experience that don't lend themselves easily to empirical, objective analysis; but, rather, offer themselves to a kind of shared subjective analysis. My feeling of love or transcendence is not yours, and it doesn't lend itself to some kinds of examination. That's true. But the fact that you, too, might have similar psychological experiences or even physical manifestations is certainly reason enough for us to talk about them—to compare notes, if nothing more. (Do you recall the first time you quaked before the Lord?)

There are things that we cannot analyze empirically, necessarily, but which have been important, for good reasons, to humans of many cultures and many ages and which, right now, you share, to one degree or another, with everyone you know and don't know. And I'd like to suggest that those things are the very stuff of much of the best poetry. Even when it doesn't seem like it.

Now on to the question: "What makes *that* thing a poem?"

If free verse apparently, *apparently*, fulfills no readily defined standard of craft, if it has no rhyme, and if it has no regular meter, how do I know when I've written a poem? Exactly what does make that page of language become a poem?

Delight. To begin, a poem must call special attention to itself *as language*, and the attention paid must reward the reader with delight. If meaning is all that I gather from having read a particular chunk of language, it's not a poem. (Some would even argue that poetry should be relatively free of meaning. I don't.)

Now that sounds a little dogmatic, and it is. But it is saved from terrible narrowness by this wondrous fact: there are infinite ways for language to give delight, ways that are very traditional (like rhyme, meter, and figures of speech), contemporary (like the position of the words on the page, like line breaks that play against syntax and force multiple simultaneous meanings, like the subtle musicality of vowels, etc.), and radically innovative (like those I haven't thought of yet, but that maybe you will). If a chunk of language says, "Look at me, I'm not your run-of-the-mill soup bowl of words—I give you delight just by my own, uh, something-or-other, that little bit of bliss you felt when reading me," then that chunk of language has met *the most essential* demand of poetry. If it does not offer delight, it is not a poem.

But a poem must be more than craft that leads to delight. And here I'll become very prescriptive: In addition to the delight factor, a poem must allow the reader to experience one of these three qualities: identification, transcendence, and epiphany. By the way, I suspect these qualities often overlap and ultimately get a little hazy. Don't worry about that. I'm being dogmatic, so you don't have to.

Identification. This quality is, I think, the one that happens most frequently in a good contemporary poem. By identification, I mean that the poem must make the reader feel something in common (identification) with the experience of the poem's implied speaker. That's simple Aristotle. When I first conceptualized this idea in relation to poetry, I referred to it in my own notes as the *ain't-that-just-the-way-it-is* factor, and I think I still may prefer my term to Aristotle's. Consider your favorite story or your favorite song. I suspect it's a favorite because it communicates something true and meaningful about your own experience of life as lived. Maybe you identify with the anger, or the joy, or the lousy tricks experience plays on a person.

It's the same with a poem, but it might obtain on a different scale. Sometimes the experience of identification in a poem might simply be, "Yes, I feel the same way when the sky looks like that in the morning." Or "Yes, I feel the same way when I run across my daddy's high school photographs." Or "Yes, I feel that same isolated, lost-in-the-world way when my cell phone dies in the airport." The degree of emotion, the importance of the predicament, the weightiness of the topic—those things don't necessarily matter. What matters is the "I feel the same way. . . ." part. That means that the poem has hit upon something true about the broader human condition, often in a very personal way. That's identification. And because the feeling takes us outside ourselves and situates us deeper in a common humanity, it's a spiritual thing.

What better for a Quaker poet to do than lead one of her fellow humans to that place of shared humanity?

So if after you've read a chunk of language you can honestly say, "Ain't that just the way it is"—and if the language itself gives you a little delight—then that poem has justified itself as a poem.

Transcendence. Because it's been used in so many contradictory ways, *transcendence* can be a confusing term. Don't let it be. In its most basic sense, to transcend simply means this: to cross a boundary. Sometimes a poem will be rambling on about something perfectly mundane—cooking squash, waiting for traffic light to change, fishing without catching any fish, etc. But by the time you get to the end of the poem, often right at the end of the poem, or maybe on the third reading, you realize that there is an abundance of significance—and yes, I'll use the term—a *spiritual* significance, in that mundane event.

A boundary has been crossed: you thought you were just reading a delightful mix of language apparently about waiting on a traffic light, but somewhere you began to realize that you, along with the speaker, were struggling against the very nature of the human relationship with the disheveled reality of time . . . or, well, something like that. Generally you *feel* the transcendence first, before you verbalize it in your mind. And in fact, nothing says that as a reader you ever have to verbalize it *at all*—or even fully make sense of it. Often you won't. You only know that for some reason you really like the poem, you want to read it again, and you want to read the next one in that literary journal or magazine or book. You know that *something is there*, that the poem has significance that crosses the boundary from the mundane matters of the flesh to the extraordinary matters of the spirit. You've been reading about particulars, but experiencing universals—something more deeply, more meaningfully human, than waiting to turn off the stove or try another bait or press the accelerator pedal.

What better gift might a Quaker poet give than to help one's fellow humans occasionally cross that line?

Epiphany. *Epiphany* is a term I'm borrowing from Christian religious tradition and, to a lesser degree, modernist literary criticism. In literary criticism, an "epiphany" is a moment of sudden understanding. But in the Christian tradition, an epiphany is the appearance of God (in one form or another). Maybe it's the recognition of divine immanence. I think that some poems are accounts of epiphanies, and that if the poem does its job well, we as readers not only understand the account presented but have just a taste, an

insinuation, of the epiphany itself. One needn't hold particular—or, indeed, any—religious views to appreciate the poem as a piece of art that relates an experience the speaker perceives as an appearance of God. But I suspect that poems with the quality of epiphany are most easily enjoyed by people who themselves have some belief in the possibility of divine encounter, of the possibility of recognizing the immanence of the holy.

The immanence of the holy.

It would seem right away that such poems would be extraordinarily rare. And if the only poems we could classify as *epiphany* were those relating the first-person experiences of wrestling with angels or being handed some big stone tablets scratched with commandments, such would be the case. But that's not quite what I'm getting at.

Think of Ralph Waldo Emerson suddenly feeling at one with the universe while stepping in a mud puddle on Harvard Square, of Walt Whitman seeing the mysteries of the universe displayed in a spear of summer grass, or of Mary Oliver hearing the perfect prayer in a flock of terns. These things fall under my category of epiphany—a deep-felt experience of the Divine in the commonplace.

Any serious artist, Quaker or otherwise, must pursue her craft with a continual awareness of the demands of contemporary practices and the expectations of contemporary audiences. And to be certain, reading and writing free verse poetry is quite a different experience from reading and writing traditional, Whittier-type poetry. But possibly these reflections have opened you to the possibility that maybe, just maybe, it's not quite as different as you may have thought. Many of the characteristics of free verse poetry are more subtle versions of the characteristics of traditional poetry, and others are not subtle at all; they may even be more intense. For people who strive to read well, both kinds of poetry can provide a satisfying, even a spiritual, reading experience. And for people most open to the spiritual aspects of their lives, poetry may well become one of the important ways they travel through—and make sense of—their days on this earth.

I hope this discussion has been an encouraging one. Quaker poets have good work to do; and it's work which lends itself, through its processes and by its products, to the living expression of Friendly principles. That writing poetry is hard work is no surprise. That it is good work, even essential work, is something of which we doubters sometimes need to be reminded.

In summary then, these are the ways I believe that the Quaker who ministers through poetry can serve her communities:

(1) She can, if her gifts allow, use the powers of poetry to teach people new and expedient ways of wisdom-nurturing self-exploration and healthful self-expression;

(2) She can, if her gifts allow, take her place in the "high art" world of serious poetry and do so with a Quaker sensibility that bears weight in the broader culture; and

(3) She can, if her gifts allow, speak to a broader audience with good, gratifying, accessible poems.

Through creative work that offers delight and that faithfully offers the experience of identification, transcendence, or epiphany, the Quaker can minister to a community or communities. We will never be John Greenleaf Whittier or Rush Limbaugh or Taylor Swift, but there's nothing frivolous about our work. For some of us, it's even a calling.

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