
THE SOUL IN TRAUMA: POETRY OF WAR IN THE CLASSROOM

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Reflecting on a dark side of human experience, this article explains how one teacher used poetry to invite students into a deeper reflection on life, death, and justice. With startling and painful examples from modern poetry, the author helps us to appreciate anew the tremendous power of the word.

In the beginning was the Word... (John 1:1)

With this enigmatic yet powerful statement, John proclaims the primacy and significance of “the Word.” While other creatures are able to communicate, human beings alone possess the spoken and written word. Words contain the potent ability to express abstract concepts and to evoke extreme emotional reactions. Nations are formed, movements begun, and world events manifested through the power of ideas expressed by words spoken, written, and shared.

Early education is grounded in teaching our youngest how to speak, read, and write. That teaching is done through careful use of words, with respect for the impact they have on young minds. As children grow and mature, they develop their own appreciation for the effect words have on themselves and others. A harsh rebuke or ridicule may bring tears or festering resentment, while words of praise and encouragement can thrill and instill self-confidence. Reading opens up vast expanses of human knowledge and history for the young reader—and writing can open up equally vast interior landscapes for those who choose to explore them. Words are as necessary and ubiquitous as the simple mealtime “please pass the bread.” No wonder they are so easily taken for granted and so often used carelessly or abused.

Great harm is done by the thoughtless use of language, and intentional harm of enormous magnitude is done through the use of words of hate. Words carry us out into the world, and we carry a sacred responsibility for how we use them. We find ourselves, in modern American society and across the globe, witnessing horrific acts of violence, assassinations, and genocide ignited by hateful words. As we observe these abominations with alarm, what can leaders in Catholic education do to challenge habits, create new possibilities for the future, and be faithful to our tradition of honoring the Word Incarnate? As we anticipate the next millennium, we must choose our words with exceptional caution and write as if the outcome of life itself were in the balance. We also must have the courage to face the unblinking truth about ourselves as human beings, what we have done, and what we are capable of doing.

Words on paper can be informative and inspiring or boring and useless. In certain cases, they reach into a place of revelation within us and transport us into a new realm of understanding. Poetry, in particular, carries that potential because it can surprise us by circumventing our mental barriers and going straight to the soul. Poetry does not describe experience, it is the experience—it accesses our tactile, auditory sense-memories as well as our emotional depths. Poetry allows us to hear language differently and more intimately. Poetry can help us to locate our compassion and empathy by permitting us to feel what the writer felt as she or he was writing.

THE POWER OF POETRY

The poet Carolyn Forché (1993) has edited a work of truth, integrity, and commitment, titled *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness*. This compilation is "...the result of a 13-year effort to understand the impress of extremity upon the poetic imagination.... It is...a poetic memorial to those who suffered and resisted through poetry itself" (pp. 30-31). Forché's masterful and eloquent introduction abruptly jolts the reader from the routine of life to the reality of what life has been and can be. These are poems written by people enduring extreme conditions of war, imprisonment, holocaust, repression, and struggle. The poems are presented in approximate chronological order, from the genocide of Armenian Christians in Turkey at the beginning of the 20th century to the final chapter, "Revolutions and the Struggle for Democracy in China," which concludes in the final decade of the century.

As an adult student I had the good fortune to be introduced to this book and reintroduced to the essence of poetry and morality by taking the class "Poems by Poets in Torment" at Fordham University, taught by the activist poet-priest Father Daniel Berrigan. His was a unique class, grave and humorous, a meditation and an opening of minds. I attended the class along with

mostly younger students of traditional college age and a smattering of older students like myself. The age and experience differential proved to be one of the many assets of the class, as we discovered that we had much to learn from each other.

Fordham University Press has published a new book of Father Berrigan's poems, *And the Risen Bread: Selected Poems, 1957-1997*, edited by John Dear. Berrigan's book was not included as a text for the class, but it is his book, Forché's book, and my time spent in his class upon which I base this article. I hope to communicate the specific value and quality of this meeting of minds—those of the past and present poets and authors; the immeasurable person of Daniel Berrigan; and the probing, exploratory minds of the students in the class. The poetry prompted discussion among the younger students about hate and prejudice-filled leaflets found in their dormitories and about what actions they could take to promote dialogue and peace within their community. The poetry in *Against Forgetting* (Forché, 1993) had an immediate, positive, and life-affirming effect upon their lives.

Berrigan was a formidable yet gentle guide, prodding us with questions and using the empty space of silence to great effect. There were, at times, great explosions of discussion followed by the quiet sense of sanctity found in an empty chapel. We were given the freedom to speak, hear, think, feel, absorb, and contemplate.

This is a classroom experience that can be re-created by other educators in other contexts, and my hope is that it will be. The dialogue and exchange between teacher and student and between students of different ages is a priceless educational gift.

Blending adult students into undergraduate classes is an effective strategy, as the different generations have much to offer each other and mutual learning is greatly enhanced. This form of teaching can be easily integrated into the curriculum and into the life of a school.

There are various forms of "light" poetry, love poetry, humorous poetry, even mocking or ribald poetry. As always, words can be used in any way we choose. Some of these can be lovely, inspiring, or simply fun. For the purposes of this paper, I am interested in speaking of the "poetry of witness," as Forché (1993) puts it in her book's subtitle—a poetry which brings one soul directly into contact with another, across time and culture, in which the voice is not only heard but felt. As Berrigan noted, sometimes we are invited by a poet to experience the few tiny pleasures and moments of peace that she or he was allowed. A brief example is taken from Nazim Hikmet's "Letters from a Man in Solitary":

Sunday today.

Today they took me out in the sun for the first time.

And I just stood there, struck for the first time in my life

by how far away the sky is,
 how blue
 and how wide (Hikmet, 1993, p. 501)

We are now called upon to respond to these suffering voices from the past—that we not perpetuate the horrors they lived and died through, and that we not carry our greatest moral failures into the future. A history lesson about war is a very different sort of lesson from the experiential type that is learned through poems written in the middle of a war zone. As Forché (1993) says in her introduction:

A poem is itself an event, a trauma that changes both a common language and an individual psyche, it is a specific kind of event, a specific kind of trauma. It is an experience entered into voluntarily. Unlike an aerial attack, a poem does not come at one unexpectedly. One has to read or listen, one has to be willing to accept the trauma. (p. 33)

Forché's mission is to counteract the facility with which we go about our daily business as if what we do and say doesn't matter in a greater context. She wants us to feel uncomfortable. She wants to awaken us from our self-absorption.

We all know that atrocities have taken place on an unprecedented scale in the last one hundred years. Such monstrous acts have come to seem almost normal. It becomes easier to forget than to remember, and this forgetfulness becomes our defense against remembering—a rejection of unnecessary sentimentality, a hardheaded acceptance of "reality." Modernity, as twentieth-century German Jewish philosophers Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno argued, is marked by a superstitious worship of oppressive force and by a concomitant reliance on oblivion. Such forgetfulness, they argue, is willful and isolating: it drives wedges between the individual and the collective fate to which he or she is forced to submit. These poems will not permit us diseased complacency. They come to us with claims that have yet to be filled, as attempts to mark us as they have themselves been marked. (Forché, 1993, p. 32)

Berrigan is one who never could be accused of "diseased complacency" (Forché, 1993, p. 32). Indeed, he has spent his lifetime fighting against it, has himself been imprisoned for his social activism and forced to smuggle his poems out of the penitentiary on scraps of paper. In the introduction to *And the Risen Bread*, Ross Labrie writes that

In Berrigan's eyes the Jesuit paradigm provided the church with individuals whose responsibility it was to know not only their religion but also the world—so as to "undergo its terrifying crises, to stand at the side of per-

plexed and hard-pressed human beings”.... Berrigan [is] a contemporary American poet who has related...significant social and political history and who has shown the power of art to transform the ordeal of social protest into the sorts of precise articulations in which the mind can find solace. (Berrigan, 1998, pp. xx, xxx)

One of Berrigan’s “Prison Poems,” entitled “Almost Everybody Is Dying Here: Only a Few Actually Make It,” is a stark reminder that Berrigan was not and is not a dilettante for justice—he and his brother Philip truly endured and witnessed much for their convictions.

at 12:30 sharp
 as though to underscore
 some unassuageable grief
 a man’s head fell to one side
 in the prison hospital.
 No record of heart disease
 a morning’s weakness only. His neck went limp
 in the pale March sunlight like a wax man’s.
 his hands opened, a beggar’s hesitant reach
 before a rich man’s shadow.
 Near, there and
 gone. (Berrigan, 1998, pp. 152-153)

No solace there. But in other places, other times, other poems, yes, Berrigan has both found and given solace through his poetry. In our classroom, I was one among others asked to select a poem of Berrigan’s to read to the class and comment upon. I chose the following, because it so resounded with my own feelings and brought that sense of solace to me. Not everyone in the class responded to it as I did, but such was the nature of the class—and should be. Other students chose poems which held particular meaning for them.

Were I God almighty, I would ordain,
 rain fall lightly where old men trod,
 no death in childbirth, neither infant nor mother,
 ditches firm fenced against the errant blind,
 aircraft come to ground like any feather.

No mischance, malice, knives.
 Tears dried. Would resolve all
 Flaw and blockage of mind
 that makes us mad, sets lives awry....

Still, some redress and healing.
 The hand of an old woman
 turns gospel page;
 it flares up gently, the sudden tears of Christ.
 (excerpted from "Miracles," Berrigan, 1998, p. 60)

Reading Berrigan's poetry was a valuable counterpoint to Forché's book. His poems are infused with a deep spirituality, while his work also reflects the blunt, raw truth about his experiences with injustice, inhumanity, and death. It was because of Father Berrigan the poet-activist that Berrigan the poet-teacher was so skilled at leading us through the disturbing material we encountered in Forché's book.

One of the harsh realities of *Against Forgetting* (Forché, 1993) was that it began with the first genocide of the century, which has been largely forgotten. The poet Siamanto's "The Dance" is an anguished example of the chain of witnesses necessary to preserve the horrific story of what was done to 20 young women during the Turkish Ottoman Empire's genocide of the Armenians. We receive the story third-hand. These "graceful brides" were forced by a mob to dance naked, then whipped and burned to death. The murder was witnessed by a woman from her window, who, in her distress, later describes for the poet what she has seen. Siamanto retells her story as best he can, trying to capture her voice.

In a field of cinders where Armenians
 were still dying,
 a German woman, trying not to cry
 told me the horror she witnessed:

"This incomprehensible thing I'm telling you about,
 I saw with my own eyes.
 From my window of hell
 I clenched my teeth
 and watched with my pitiless eyes:

...Don't be afraid. I must tell you what I say,
 so people will understand
 the crimes men do to men....

In vain I shook my fists at the crowd.
 'Dance,' they raved,
 'dance till you die, infidel beauties....'

...Like a storm I slammed the shutters
 of my windows,...
 and asked: 'How can I dig out my eyes,
 how can I dig, tell me?'" (Siamanto, 1993, pp. 57-59)

The cries of real women can be heard here. The poem summons us to action. What will we do? This type of poetry might provide the teacher with an opportunity to suggest ways that their students can respond to such a call, perhaps by simply reading the poem to a friend. Might they take a stand against war wherever it is taking place? Can they make efforts to cultivate empathy where there is hate? The question should be asked: What is our part to play in the memory of those who have been butchered?

One of the poems in *Against Forgetting* (Forché, 1993) written by a different author during a later but equally, even “greater,” war, World War II, nevertheless contains some unusual and affirming concepts. They are included in excerpts from “The Walls Do Not Fall” by H. D. (Hilda Doolittle). Doolittle endured the London Blitz of 1940, and composed this piece, among others, during that time.

Doolittle shifts back and forth between imagery of the monuments of ancient Egypt to the stark reality of bombs exploding over the monuments and homes of London. It may be her effort to compare their respective physical resistance to the forces of destruction. My attraction to this poem is what it says about writing, itself, in the last section, Section X. This section is both astonishing and irritating to me. The irritation comes from the realization that the author is flirting with a cliché—alluding to “the pen is mightier than the sword” (Lytton, 1986). The astonishment comes from these incredible (and excerpted) lines:

“...so what good are your scribblings?
this—we take them with us

beyond death...
script, letters, palette;

the indicated flute or lyre-notes
on papyrus or parchment

are magic, indelibly stamped
on the atmosphere...” (p. 193)

What I take from this passage is that words are beyond death—that they, once born, are ever-existent, “indelibly stamped on the atmosphere.” This is a profoundly mystical concept, which if true, would further illustrate the magnitude of the importance of the words we speak.

We have some understanding of this possibility when we remember the words of loved ones who have passed on, and the effect they can continue to have upon us. If we believe in a God who hears all, knows all, and remembers all, then there is no difficulty in accepting that words are permanent and that we are responsible for them.

The words we save in book form have always been immensely important to us—they are sacred in a way, whether secular or religious. They contain our thoughts, ideas, memories, and prayers. The destruction of literary, historical, personal, or religious literature is a violation which the human spirit often responds to as if a murder were being committed. Doolittle rages against this form of violence in these earlier stanzas excerpted from Section IX:

...our books are a floor
of smouldering ash under our feet;

though the burning of the books remains
the most perverse gesture

and the meanest
of man's mean nature... (p. 193)

Death and persistent survival in the face of death and destruction are themes that are threaded throughout Doolittle's rather lengthy poem. The conclusion she reaches is from the conception of the original personification of divine speech, and may be her proclamation of triumph over war and the sword:

In the beginning
was the Word. (p. 194)

As we prepare to enter the Jubilee Year of 2000, may we honor the promise it holds in all the words that we speak and write.

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