

[return to updates](#)

# THE FUTURE OF POETRY



*by Miles Mathis*

Many would argue that poetry is dead, and if we had to continue on either of the paths contemporary poetry is traveling, I would say that is true. But we don't.

Serious poetry is now split into two main factions. Some would include slam poetry as a third faction, but I just precluded slam poetry with the word "serious." As I have [argued before](#), slam poetry is a performance art for the defectively educated, having little or no concern for the beauty of the word, the meter, or the meaning. It is usually little more than another excuse to look cool among the illiterati. Real poets have always striven to make their art a high art; slam poetry is a low art, like rap without the music. Yes, slam poetry, like rap, has its place. It is useful both as expression and political speech. But it isn't serious poetry.

That leaves us with traditional poetry and modern poetry. What I am calling modern poetry is the mainstream poetry you have seen in journals for the past fifty years. Like modern art, modern poetry has jettisoned most of the old rules and customs of poetry. It has outlawed or obsoleted meter, rhyming, form, and most content. It has also outlawed most emotion. It is a stripped-down minimalist poetry of bald observation, daily happenings, and tepid feeling, to match the modern world it comes from. Like other art forms after 1900, it has become a self-conscious mirror of society. This new definition of poetry has determined the sorts of poets who have been drawn to it: no poet by the old definitions would waste time writing under such inartistic constraints. For this reason we have seen poetry taken over by stockbrokers, house husbands, and short-haired women.

In this way, modern poetry is even less poetic and powerful than slam poetry. It has even *less* claim to the word poetry than the rappers have. Instead of bad rhymes and easy meter, it has no rhymes or meter. Instead of cliché ideas and emotions, it has no emotions or ideas. Instead of TV politics, it has no politics. It has devolved into a sort of pale-white zombie-poetry for the overmedicated.

In response to this trend, a small cabal of classicists are promoting a return to meter. They have created their own journals and demand that anyone submitting be able to pass a scan-test. In some small ways this is admirable, but as with realist painting and sculpture, it is only a partial solution. This definition of poetry also constrains the field, by attracting the most rule-bound personalities. Instead of retired stockbrokers, we get retired accountants. If you amend a villanelle or flirt with sprung meter, their adding machines go berserk. Their poems tend to bald observation, daily happenings, and tepid feeling forced into terza rima or dactylic hexameter.

You can see how neither of these paths is likely to lead to real art. They can't lead to real art because their definitions of poetry don't draw real artists. One is too formless and one is too form-constrained. And neither puts the emphasis on emotion, where it belongs. In all art, form must be in service of content, and the content of art is feeling.

You see, modern art was founded on a falsehood. In order to revolutionize art, early art critics told us that the content of art *was* its form. From Clive Bell and Roger Fry to Clement Greenberg, the argument started by defining art as its form. The forms were then thrown out or broken in order to take the art into a new century. But this argument was always flawed at the ground level, because art was never defined by its form. By focusing on form for a century (or more), the critics and artists lost all knowledge of content. No one has seemed to notice that while form was being minimalized, content was being superminimalized or hyperminimalized. The only thing a modern poem has less of than form is content.

And this is why the return to classicism in art and poetry is feckless. You have to return to forms *because* they allow you to reintroduce content. Talking about form for its own sake is just more of the same Modernism.

To give a body to all these claims, let us look at a few examples. The first is from Paul Muldoon, the poetry editor at *The New Yorker*. Muldoon sort of straddles my two factions, having made a nod to old forms from time to time. But his poems are still small and pinched regardless of any meters he is dabbling with.

### *The Hedgehog*

The snail moves like a  
Hovercraft, held up by a  
Rubber cushion of itself,  
Sharing its secret

With the hedgehog. The hedgehog  
Shares its secret with no one.  
We say, Hedgehog, come out  
Of yourself and we will love you.

We mean no harm. We want

Only to listen to what  
You have to say. We want  
Your answers to our questions.

The hedgehog gives nothing  
Away, keeping itself to itself.  
We wonder what a hedgehog  
Has to hide, why it so distrusts.

We forget the god  
under this crown of thorns.  
We forget that never again  
will a god trust in the world.

I have seen that poem presented in classrooms or on the internet as a poem worth reading, though I can't say why. The first four stanzas look like they were written by a young highschooler, not a Pulitzer prize winner. Why start with the snail, only to drop him immediately? Why call his foot a “rubber cushion” when it is not rubber and is not like rubber? Does the image of the hovercraft help sell the metaphors that follow, or hinder them? And those hanging “a's” in the first two lines: is that supposed to be bold? Are we supposed to take that as a rhyme? To me it just looks lazy, ugly, and unpoetic.

What secret does a snail share with a hedgehog? The poet doesn't even bother to intimate what that might be, since he has no idea himself: he is just trying to be clever. He is not capturing the pantheism he needs to make this sort of poem work, and that is because real pantheists don't reference hovercrafts or rubber cushions in stanza one.

“Come out of yourself and we will love you”? That doesn't work either, because both the language and the sentiment are wrong. How would an animal “come out of itself”? And why would we want it to? Why would we ask it to change in order to be loved? Do we really wonder why a hedgehog is distrusting? Might it be because we run over about a million a year, and don't care? And what does any of that have to do with the god under his crown of thorns, which must be Jesus? Just as we got the very loose simile between the snail's foot and rubber, we get a very loose simile between the mistrust of Jesus and the mistrust of a hedgehog, with the spines/thorns relationship the only real link. But none of this works. The last stanza is a late, fake attempt to give this poem some weight, but it fails utterly because “the god under his crown of thorns” never came based on trust or distrust. I am not a Christian and even I know that. Christianity is based on the idea that Christ came precisely because he knew what sinners we were, not to be trusted. If we were the sort of creatures that cared enough for hedgehogs not to run over them, if we were the sort of creatures that loved hedgehogs without asking them to come out of themselves, if we were the sort of creatures that thought to listen to Nature in any way, we would not have needed to be saved, by Jesus or any other god. So Muldoon's metaphor is (accidentally, we assume) inverted. Muldoon's poem is not just a small success—as some might argue—it is a huge crashing failure of idea for such a little thing. It is nonsense posing as sense and shallowness posing as depth.

As a different example, let us look at Natasha Trethewey, recently named as the US poet laureate.

ELEGY

*For my father*

I think by now the river must be thick  
with salmon. Late August, I imagine it

as it was that morning: drizzle needling  
the surface, mist at the banks like a net

settling around us — everything damp  
and shining. That morning, awkward

and heavy in our hip waders, we stalked  
into the current and found our places —

you upstream a few yards and out  
far deeper. You must remember how

the river seeped in over your boots  
and you grew heavier with that defeat.

I can't read more than that, my mind already numb with a surfeit of banalities. I gave her six couplets to do something—anything—poetic, and she didn't do it. The closest she came was the drizzle needling the surface, but although that approaches being expressive, it still manages to be false. Drizzle is a soft rain, and therefore cannot “needle” a surface. Rain does sometimes needle the surface of a river, as I can see in my mind, but that is when it is raining hard. Let's give her another chance:

#### LIMEN

All day I've listened to the industry  
of a single woodpecker, worrying the catalpa tree  
just outside my window. Hard at his task,

his body is a hinge, a door knocker  
to the cluttered house of memory in which  
I can almost see my mother's face.

She is there, again, beyond the tree,  
its slender pods and heart-shaped leaves,  
hanging wet sheets on the line — each one

a thin white screen between us. So insistent  
is this woodpecker, I'm sure he must be  
looking for something else — not simply

the beetles and grubs inside, but some other gift  
the tree might hold. All day he's been at work,  
tireless, making the green hearts flutter.

No, that one's just as flabby. A woodpecker makes her think of her mother, but she cannot manage to think or intimate anything interesting. And even the connection of the woodpecker and the mother is

manufactured: he is a knocker to the house of memory! That is actually the transition she uses. Why can she “almost” see her mother's face? Is her memory so bad that she can't call up her own mother's face? And oh the glory of language, where a wet sheet is also “a thin white screen.” Brilliant.

As with Muldoon's hedgehog, Trethewey's woodpecker is a pantheistic spirit, looking for “some other gift” in the tree. But again as with Muldoon, Trethewey can't give us the slightest hint what that might be. We don't expect her to just tell us—that wouldn't be poetic—but we need some beautiful hint. Or we need her to create a space in which we can supply our own answer. But none of her forms or ideas take us there. Her ideas and language simply aren't up for the journey.

Let us take a very different poet, Joseph Brodsky, who is considered by many to be a heavyweight, having won the Nobel Prize in 1987. This is the first poem that comes up in a websearch:

A list of some observation...

A list of some observation. In a corner, it's warm.  
A glance leaves an imprint on anything it's dwelt on.  
Water is glass's most public form.  
Man is more frightening than its skeleton.  
A nowhere winter evening with wine. A black  
porch resists an osier's stiff assaults.  
Fixed on an elbow, the body bulks  
like a glacier's debris, a moraine of sorts.  
A millennium hence, they'll no doubt expose  
a fossil bivalve propped behind this gauze  
cloth, with the print of lips under the print of fringe,  
mumbling "Good night" to a window hinge.

As to form, we have two rhymes and some slant rhymes but no attention to meter. Except for “osier” and perhaps “bivalve”, the language is not interesting. So we are left with the ideas, which are both scattershot and foggy. The poem starts off very weakly: that first line is a throwaway. Who cares if it's warm in the corner? The fact neither resonates nor prepares us for anything after. The words were chosen only to rhyme with “form” in line 3, but line 3 wasn't worth keeping either. It's a stab at cleverness, but on a second thought it is neither true nor interesting. And it isn't stated well regardless, because we suppose he means the water in the glass, not water itself. No, in that sense, glass is *sand's* most public form. Or even more precisely, glass is sand's most civic form. Or, water is ice's most civil form, or something to that effect. Even if we learn to think—after a third reading—that he is talking of the water in the glass, it isn't clear that a glass of water is more public than a glass of beer or a glass of milk.

The rest of the poem reads the same way, or *fails* to read the same way. I have to think that the Russian Nabokov would say this poem proves the Russian Brodsky never properly learned English, or biology or physics for that matter. In the last four lines, Brodsky finally decides to focus on one thing, but that thing is still wildly out of focus. He says that “they” will expose a bivalve behind “this gauze cloth.” Who are they, and what cloth is he talking about? Is he implying that mollusks may evolve in just 1,000 years into speaking species? I think he needs to reread his Darwin. And even if “they” could create a speaking mollusk in a test tube, why would the mollusk say goodnight to a window hinge? Simply to rhyme with “fringe”? This isn't a poem, it is eight stupid ideas forced into twelve lines. Let's try another one:

*I sit by the window*

I said fate plays a game without a score,  
and who needs fish if you've got caviar?  
The triumph of the Gothic style would come to pass  
and turn you on--no need for coke, or grass.  
I sit by the window. Outside, an aspen.  
When I loved, I loved deeply. It wasn't often.

I said the forest's only part of a tree.  
Who needs the whole girl if you've got her knee?  
Sick of the dust raised by the modern era,  
the Russian eye would rest on an Estonian spire.  
I sit by the window. The dishes are done.  
I was happy here. But I won't be again.

I wrote: The bulb looks at the flower in fear,  
and love, as an act, lacks a verb; the zer-  
o Euclid thought the vanishing point became  
wasn't math--it was the nothingness of Time.  
I sit by the window. And while I sit  
my youth comes back. Sometimes I'd smile. Or spit.

I said that the leaf may destroy the bud;  
what's fertile falls in fallow soil--a dud;  
that on the flat field, the unshadowed plain  
nature spills the seeds of trees in vain.  
I sit by the window. Hands lock my knees.  
My heavy shadow's my squat company.

My song was out of tune, my voice was cracked,  
but at least no chorus can ever sing it back.  
That talk like this reaps no reward bewilders  
no one--no one's legs rest on my shoulders.  
I sit by the window in the dark. Like an express,  
the waves behind the wavelike curtain crash.

A loyal subject of these second-rate years,  
I proudly admit that my finest ideas  
are second-rate, and may the future take them  
as trophies of my struggle against suffocation.  
I sit in the dark. And it would be hard to figure out  
which is worse; the dark inside, or the darkness out.

That's vintage Brodsky, so no one can claim I picked with an ill will. It has a certain charm, I admit, but it is far from great poetry. The first two lines tell us that by themselves. The second line is a *non sequitur*, which is the last thing you want this early. What do fish and caviar have to do with fate playing a game without a score? Like most of Brodsky's rhymes here and elsewhere, it is pushed.

Plus, as usual, his sentiment is neither true nor suggestive. The only thing this suggests is that you don't need the basics when you have the frills, but that is upside down. Poetry is a going-deep, but you can hardly go deep by admitting you are shallow, as Brodsky does here. He tells us even his best ideas were second-rate, which is true. He found it hard to love. He didn't require the whole girl. He had a taste for caviar and spires. He thinks it is clever to rhyme fear with the zer- of zero. In other words, he is not really an artist. He is a semi-clever word cruncher in a century that can do no better.

To be fair, this is nice:

I sit by the window. Outside, an aspen.  
When I loved, I loved deeply. It wasn't often.

That actually works. The slant rhyme is both clever and apposite, creating the perfect mood for the moment. The meter is also perfect. If Brodsky had taken the care to mold each idea to this level, I would have nothing to criticize. But he almost never did.

---

---

If the present and recent past of poetry have been so bleak, why do I think there is any future to it? Because these two roads being traveled by poets now are only two of many. I will suggest here a third path.

We have been told that everything has been done and that there is nothing new under the sun. We are told that poetry peaked with Dante or Shakespeare or Milton, and has been in decline ever since. While there is some truth to that, as a matter of fact, as a matter of possibility it couldn't be more false. The reason poetry has been in decline for at least a century—and probably for a lot longer than that—is that poets have been far too inbred and far too timid. Meter from the time of the Romans to the time of Thomas Hardy hardly changed at all. To see what I mean by that, I remind you that meter was originally introduced to make poetry musical. Meter is an analogue of music. It is a cadence introduced to a line of words, to give it a more musical interest. But while music evolved into very complex combinations of beats—remaining musical—poetry didn't. Music developed syncopation and triplets and grace notes and trills and arpeggios and melody and harmony and a thousand other things, while poetry stuck to iambs, trochees, and—in its most daring moments—dactyls. To this day, the metrical foot is either disyllabic or trisyllabic, and even most of those are unheard of. What poet now uses the tribrach or molossus, or even knows what they are? Prosody, like so many other old arts, is dead.

In the same way, the line has been limited to a certain number of feet, with most metered poetry being four, five, or six feet. Boring! Did any musician ever limit his arpeggios or phrases to six feet? Chopin ran up and down the keyboard with his arpeggios. What 20<sup>th</sup> c. poet has done that or anything like that? Dylan Thomas, maybe, once or twice. And the same can be said of stanzas. While the possibilities are endless, we tend to get the same thing over and over.

When poets began to tire of the old forms in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, most didn't begin to experiment with the musical qualities of poetry, as I am suggesting here. Instead they threw out or broke the standard forms. It is now clear why this failed to revolutionize poetry. Minimalism must always be a failed revolution in any art, because rather than adding to the possibilities of the art, it restricts them. You do not revolutionize an art by sitting on it.

So while the “freedom” given to poetry in the past 150 years would have seemed to be a good thing, it went nowhere because it was always a negative freedom. It was a freedom to be less, not a freedom to be more.



We have seen a few steps in the right direction in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, but they were mostly misinterpreted or ignored. The most revolutionary of all was Gerard Manley Hopkins, a Jesuit priest who flourished in the 1870's. Hopkins was influenced by the novel use of language and the stark emotion of Christina Rossetti—who is underestimated to this day—but he took the experiment far beyond Rossetti. His greatest fame rests on his “sprung rhythm,” but it was misconstrued and undervalued even by himself. The rhythm wasn't really “sprung,” except as it sprung away from the false constrictions of di- and trisyllabic meter. At Wikipedia, we are told, “Some critics believe he merely coined a name for poems with mixed, irregular feet, like free verse,” proving the tin ear of all critics and most poets. Hopkins' poetry is always fully musical, unlike free verse. Free verse has a free and often unmusical cadence, whereas Hopkins meter is *more* musical than any previous—or subsequent—poetry. Why? Because, unknown fully even to himself, Hopkins had a world-class (and what has turned out to be a history-class) ear for triplets, syncopation, and other musical forms, and the ability to set them in perfect time with spoken language. His greatest realization was that the musicality of a line of poetry had much more to do with the stressed syllables, and very little to do with the unstressed. A foot could take almost any number of unstressed syllables, provided they were of the right sort in the right order. But it went far beyond that, because, as in music, the pleasant forward motion of the line never depended on repeating feet or maintaining the length of lines. The ear actually prefers a great deal of variation, as long as a pleasing rhythm is maintained. The motion forward can be slowed, as with triplets (or the molossus), but it should be slowed for a reason—as when you wish the reader to savor or pay special attention to the three stressed syllables. But it should almost never be stopped or reversed. It should only be stopped if the motion of ideas has halted in the poem, for some very good reason. And it should only be reversed if the emotion in the poem reverses, again for some very good and internal reason.

Hopkins' revolution failed because it was misunderstood. Almost everyone thought he had broken the old forms, when he had actually extended and transcended them. His word “sprung” contributed to this confusion, since a sprung rhythm leads you to think of a broken rhythm. But his rhythm wasn't broken, it was improved and widened. At its best, his meter was even better than the meter of Shakespeare or Dante. Hopkins didn't have the wealth of ideas of a Shakespeare, of course, but he was a better musician.

Hopkins was an innovator beyond rhythm, because he also liked to use uncommon words and to use them uncommonly. He opposed words in new ways, played with internal rhymes, and used the hyphen to connect words that hadn't been so connected before him. This revitalized poetry in a natural way, by



substantially extending both its reach and its breadth.

We have seen Muldoon and Trethewey fail to do what Hopkins does in *The Windhover*.

I caught this morning morning's minion, king-  
dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding  
Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding  
High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing  
In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,  
As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and gliding  
Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding  
Stirred for a bird,—the achieve of; the mastery of the thing!

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here  
Buckle! And the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion  
Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!

No wonder of it: shéer plód makes plough down sillion  
Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,  
Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion.

Muldoon tries to connect a hedgehog to Christ, and Trethewey tries to connect a woodpecker to “some other gift,” but it takes much finer language and loftier ideas and higher emotion to successfully etherealize a beast, as Hopkins does here. We should note that bold opening hyphenation of king-dom as well, since it ties to Brodsky's attempt to hyphenate zer-o, remember? But where this novelty of Hopkins cries out courage and is successful, Brodsky's novelty cries out clumsiness, and fails.

I stand in ever-increasing awe of that first stanza, which Hopkins could just as well have written as one long arpeggio on a line of sheet music, staying as it does always in the same key, with perfect pitch. How could anyone confuse that with free verse? Free verse is normally dreary with its lack of music, but how Hopkins sings! I can't believe anyone finds this difficult to scan, either. The first line is iambic pentameter (although we are taught that sprung rhythm is always trochaic). The second line is also iambic, except that it starts with an anapaest, and the sixth foot has three shorts and a long. The final short is hanging, but it combines with the anapaest of line three, again giving us three shorts in that split foot. The rest of the poem scans in the same way, save for the occasional stressed triplet, as in “air, pride, plume” or “dear, fall, gall.” These stackings of stressed syllables work precisely because of their placement in the greater rhythm, and because they fit the content. Hopkins *wants* you to slow down there, saying those words slower in order to feel the stress and full meaning in your mouth. It is strictly analogous to a musical triplet, which does the same thing. His use of the bacchius in line seven, foot two, is also brilliant: “rebuffed the big wind.” Coming after an antidactyl, it brings us to the stop with just the right amount of pressure, like a horse reined in by a master.

This poem also proves the basic equivalence of the trochee and the iamb. We are taught that they are the reverse of one another, with the iamb moving quickly forward and the trochee dragging. But that was always false. The only difference between the two has been the first beat, but the cadence is the same no matter which you start with. If you are on a horse going clippity-clop, does it matter if the horse started on clippity or clop? No. What causes the speed of the cadence is the words chosen and the meaning of those words, not the name on the meter. Hopkins proves this in line 8, which is strictly trochaic since it starts long. But since it is simply a continuation of the iambs in line 7, there is no

slowing of the cadence. The poem doesn't suddenly become heavy because the line started long. Clearly, Hopkins cut the line there for other reasons. He wasn't switching from iamb to trochee, he was just isolating “stirred for a bird” on the page, so that you could *see* it better.

Hart Crane, who flourished in the 1920's, learned some of this from Hopkins where few others did. Crane didn't live long enough to do much with his new bag of tools, and his ideas were even more limited than Hopkins, but he at least brought the new maximalism into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although his poems were commonly quite short and simple, the density of them confused even the well-educated of his time, and they are beyond the comprehension of most now. But this is less an indication of their inherent difficulty and more an indication of the collapse of civilization, and especially of the humanities. Although I have admired Hopkins since college, I just learned of Crane. Nonetheless, I consider him a fellow traveler.

Dylan Thomas had the best ear of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and although he denied the influence of Hopkins, he got Hopkins via Hardy. Thomas was more musical than Hardy, but usually more superficial. He is often playing with cadence, and the words are just along for the ride. But like Hopkins, Thomas left no school. He was a single blip. He was too technical for the moderns and too flighty for the classicists, and he has no high-profile students.

The examples of Crane and Thomas are instructive in my overall argument, because I have discovered that many [traditionalists dismiss them both as modern](#). I found this shocking, since it is so contrary to my own innate delineations of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For me, Hart and Thomas are signs of poetic hope in an unpoetic time. But for those who style themselves as traditionalists, these poets are full of “jarring disjunctions.” They are an “assault on the normal conventions of linguistic usage and discursive thought.” Mark Anthony Signorelli actually quotes these lines of Hart as an example:

Again the traffic lights that skim thy swift  
Unfractioned idiom, immaculate sigh of stars,  
Beading thy path--condense eternity:  
And we have seen night lifted in thine arms.

I don't see how that is any more jarring or disjunct than just about any four lines of Shakespeare. To my eye and ear, it is consummately flowing and conjunct. How could any poet or reader choose those four lines—among all the lines of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—to represent the anti-art of modernism? It isn't poetic discipline or ambition that most traditionalists seem to care for, it is obeying a narrow set of rules. They don't want to have to look at anything they haven't seen a thousand times before, since they were in knee pants. In my admittedly short time spent wading through the poetry markets, I have found that these traditionalists—like the traditionalists in painting—also tend to be the worst sort of neo-conservatives, writing odes to Reagan and Thatcher. I haven't seen any sonnets to Cheney, but I guess we only have that to look forward to. This by itself would be enough to sour any real artist on neo-traditionalism in poetry. I don't require that artists and poets be Shelleyan free-spirits, dabbling in every sort of new-age experimentation. But I expect I will never see a decent poem from the American right. Geoffrey Hill is about as far right as a contemporary poet is likely to go, and if he were transported to the US, he would be in the Green Party.

---

---

So what does this mean for the future of poetry? It means that there is a lot left to accomplish. Although the great poets of the past wrote many poems on many subjects, nothing is finished. The

poems not yet written are nearly infinite. Only a small fraction of all possible poetic forms have been invented. And even the old forms are far from exhausted. Some think Shakespeare and Keats and the rest have done all that can be done with the sonnet, for instance, but I think otherwise. Some great poet of the future will surpass them and all.

Hopkins showed us the way to this wide-open future, but even he only touched the surface. He was a great experimenter, but his experiment was very limited itself. He allowed himself to be squashed by the Church, and those after him were squashed by the larger and scarier church of Modernism. Only now, with the final collapse of that later church, can poets begin to use the freedom he hinted at, transcending both the old meter and the newer constrictions of a hyper-egalitarian poetry.

To do this, poets must flee and resist both the constrictions on form and the constrictions on content. Form must be re-expanded and re-maximalized, using the old musical qualities of meter, but extending them in all directions. As to content, the new poet must break the social and political shackles that have kept poetry small and quotidian. Poetry has been “democratized” in the worst possible way, meaning it has been compressed into a middling sameness. Same and tame, as Hopkins put it 140 years ago. He might have added, lame.

This means that the poet must leave both contemporary paths, striking off through the brush. It is death to follow the moderns, because they will crush you in their little socio-political pens, fenced in with fake freedoms and forced to bow to all the current shibboleths.

But you are just as dead if you follow the classicists, hemmed in by their small rectitudes. If Hart Crane is already too much for them, we cannot expect them to embrace a new Shakespeare, who will shatter all their tiny sensibilities.

That is what it is about, you know. The revolution in any art is about making room for the very large, and the 20<sup>th</sup> century never made that room. Instead, Modernism went about re-building the artist as homunculus. The dead-average were encouraged to take over every field, and the exceptional were encouraged to drown themselves.

The exceptional can only respond by refusing to do so, and continuing to work. Geoffrey Hill (who was also trashed by Signorelli along with Hart Crane, go figure), has finally begun to triumph in the past three years, now being 80—after decades of implicit requests from the postmodern mainstream that he go drown himself. This we can take as another sign of hope. But I would suggest to the gatekeepers that 80 years may be a too-long dues-paying. A healthy art in any field can't be built on such harsh custom.