

The Hatred of Poetry
Ferrar Straus and Giroux
ISBN: 9780865478206(paperback)
9780374712334(e-book) \$12.00

Review by Wendell Smith

The Hatred of Poetry was presented to me as fortuitously as The Never Ending Story was to Bastian Balthazar Bux, as an apparition the legendary Joe Leaphorn would have told Jim Chee not to dismiss as coincidental. This monograph celebrating our ambivalent dependence upon poetry manifested one Saturday morning on the table of the Bagel Bards at the Au Bon Pain in Davis Square by way of the Canton Public Library. I picked it up preparing a rebuttal that I never got to because, when I discovered that Ben Lerner had first encountered this conundrum we call poetry where I had, in an English class at Topeka High School, I was hooked, and I soon discovered that even with my head start (I graduated from THS in 1960, he in the mid '90s) he was way ahead of me.

Lerner begins his essay with an anecdote that sets a comic tone for our shared struggle with poetry. His freshman English teacher, Mrs. X, requires her class to choose a poem to memorize and then recite. Lerner, well, let's let him tell the story:

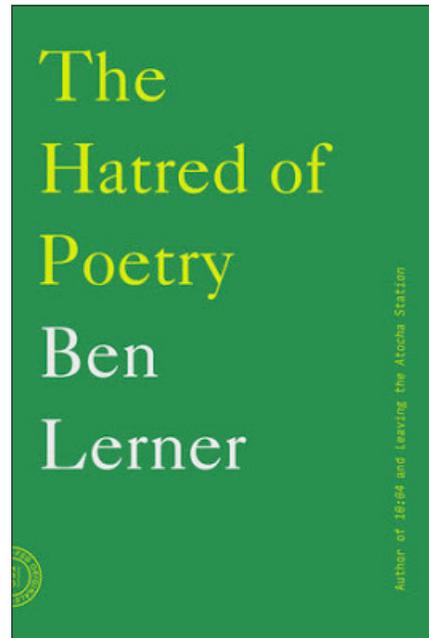
So I went and asked the Topeka High School librarian to direct me to the shortest poem she knew, and she suggested Marianne Moore's "Poetry," which, in the 1967 version, reads in its entirety:

*I, too, dislike it.
Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it,
one discovers in
it, after all, a place for the genuine.*

I remember thinking my classmates were suckers for having mainly memorized Shakespeare's eighteenth sonnet, whereas I had only to recite 24 words. Never mind the fact that a set rhyme and iambic pentameter make 14 of Shakespeare's lines easier to memorize than Moore's three, each one of which is interrupted by a conjunctive adverb – a parallelism of awkwardness that basically serves as its form.

* * *

In fact, "Poetry" is a very difficult poem to commit to memory, as I demonstrated by failing to get it right each of the three chances I was given by Mrs. X, who was looking down at the text my classmates cracking up.



Wilderness House Literary Review 11/3

He follows his narration of this joke that poetry has played upon him with some 80 pages of cogent prose exploring the implications of those three lines and 24 words. "I too dislike it," becomes a mantra that brings unity to the variety of his arguments and I am finding his essay more useful in "understanding poetry" than Cleanth Brooks' and Robert Penn Warren's tome, *Understanding Poetry*. One reason I think Lerner's book is more useful is that he seems to know poems should be experienced, felt not "understood." This brings to mind a poem about poetry, which we foist upon high school students, Archibald McLeish's, "Ars Poetica"; although I find it too precious by half -- "I, too, dislike it" -- its final two lines "A poem should not mean/But be." support this idea that the "meaning" of poems is somehow beyond comprehension by our reason.

The *Hatred of Poetry* has a quality that I think good criticism needs; it stimulates your imagination about the poems you already love; it encourages you to freely associate with them, which enlarges their being. For example, as I was contemplating poems above for recruiting youth to *The Hatred of Poetry* I thought, rather than "Ars Poetica," we would be more successful if we were to subject them to Ramon Guthrie's, "On Seeing the First Woodchuck of the Spring and the Last Pterodactyl." And, although my reasons for preferring Guthrie are an essay for another day, I think the arrival of Guthrie in the middle of this evaluation of Lerner's monograph demonstrates *The Hatred of Poetry's* power of provocation. Why bother to read criticism if it doesn't set you thinking about its subject, set your mind to exploring the territory.

In fact, I think this little monograph (the book is 7.5 X 5 inches and the text blocks are 3 X 5) would make an excellent text for any introduction to poetry. Ironically, before you could subject the tender eyes of sexting adolescents to it, you would have to edit out his one use of "fucking." In spite of how refreshing it would be to have the language of everyday discourse used in a discussion of poetry and how that use might free students to think about how to dislike it, "fucking" would be the excuse censors would use to dismiss Lerner. I think, their real objection might be that his thesis brings him to praise poetry such as Claudia Rankine's with its power to make us feel; in her case its power to breed empathy in our souls for what our racism does to her, how our racism lashes at her sensibility, and to recognized the shear produced in our own souls by our concurrent awareness of our white privilege (I feel your pain and I am simultaneously protected from it.). If our hatred of poetry can lead us to appreciate such poetry, then it will lead us to appreciate our hatreds and the paradox that we can't do anything about our hatreds until we can appreciate them. And those appreciations lead us to question a social status quo. In other words, *The Hatred of Poetry* is dangerous. This danger attributed to poetry is another theme dating to Plato, which Lerner explores in parallel with the paradox that poetry has also been reviled for being impotent.

The *Hatred* is good criticism because it gets you thinking in new ways about poetry familiar to you while it introduces you to poetry with which you weren't familiar. Lerner has intriguing things to say about a bundle of poets beginning with "Caedmon, the first poet in English whose name we know" to Whitman and Dickinson. As he discusses them he develops his compelling thesis: poets, too, "dislike it" even as they write it, because the imaginative source of the poem can never be realized by either the

Wilderness House Literary Review 11/3

poet, nor her reader. As a dream is lucid until we wake so the poem is lucid until it is written (Lerner's metaphor). Thus the poet is doomed to failure (truth perceived is always compromised when translated into words) but also doomed to perpetually attempt that translation. The argument implies that the human condition is a divine imagination, which can't be expressed fully in a material reality (illusion?). Wordsworth (the irony of allegory): "our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting;" Browning: "Ah, but man's reach should exceed his grasp." You, no doubt, have your own fragments that point to what we might come to know about our selves through poetry once we admit our hatred for it. Here is how Lerner puts it in his concluding paragraph:

There is no need to go on multiplying examples of an impulse that can produce no adequate examples – of a capacity that can't be objectified without falsification. I've written in its defense, and in defense of our denunciation of it, because that is the dialectic of a vocation no less essential for being impossible. All I ask of the haters – and I, too, am one – is that they strive to perfect their contempt, even consider bringing it to bear on poems, where it will be deepened, not dispelled, and where, by creating a place for possibility and present absences (like unheard melodies), it might come to resemble love.

And I'll close my praise with a cheer, "Hoy! Hoy! Mighty Troy!" that may only be appreciated fully by the 15,000 or so of our fellow graduates because, if he continues writing like this, Ben Lerner could become to 21st century American letters what another Topeka High School alumnus, Dean Smith, became to 20th century American basketball.