

Nights of Average Nerves: Popular Culture and Me

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Abstract

In this article an Australian poet and critic reflects on his own aims and aesthetics, set against a world that uncritically praises pop culture and largely ignores poetry. The article considers the difference between “popular culture” and “pop culture,” and the reasons why poetry has fallen from general view, arguing that it is partly because of the strengths of poetry – which always needs a link to the general community and had it until the advent of Modernism – and partly because of the problems built into contemporary evaluations of poetry. Thus the article shifts between personal values and general issues related to poetry in our time, and advocates a return to a traditional valuing of shared emotions rather than of wilful complexity.

Keywords

Popular culture, poetry, Modernism, simplicity, the ordinary, image

Some people are fortunate enough to be born into a cultured household, hearing Mozart in their cradle and having books read to them every night; for the rest of us, our first contact with culture, in anything other than the anthropological sense, will almost certainly be with popular culture. This was certainly true for me: I grew up in a working class house without books or paintings or music; my parents would never have dreamt of going to the theatre, and could never have afforded tickets if they'd had the dream. I'm not complaining: it was a loving family and my parents had a happy marriage. These things are much more important to nurture a poet, or anyone else, than nights at the opera. Your parents' values are absorbed into your bones. In adult life I've recognised that my childhood's working class values are deeply ingrained in me, and their anti-poetic nature underlies, and I think has strengthened my poems. Of course, no critic has ever recognised this but perhaps it would be asking too much to expect it.

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The first record player in our house was one I asked for as a teenager's Christmas present, and on it I played surfing music and songs – the Beach Boys and Jan and Dean were then in their first flush of fashion. Long before that, my mother, who was not a reader, took us to the local library every week, and by the time I was in high school I had almost read that library dry. Only much later did I realise how important that experience was. I was also given pocket money for doing household jobs, and spent it at the local cinema on Saturday afternoons. There was nothing enlightened about my reading or viewing: I delighted in murder mysteries – the more ghoulish the better – Tarzan, comedies and comic writing, and stories about heroes such as King Arthur. Who knows how such experiences ramify in his or her consciousness? No doubt these films and stories, and radio serials, helped give me a sense of drama, of plots and characterisation, and a sense of humour.

Poetry in our time is at the other end of the scale from these activities, especially when you consider how pervasive technology has enabled pop culture to become. Poetry is a marginalised art, and poets can only be envious of the attention that popular artists command – let alone the money they receive. Nevertheless, each condition has its strengths and liabilities; many pop stars have had their lives wrecked through awareness that their self cannot live up to their image, while writing poems that few people read can focus attention on the writing itself and thereby ensure the integrity of the activity. Of course, the current situation was not always the case; for centuries, poetry – at least lyric poetry – *was* popular culture. I suspect that every contemporary poet yearns to return to that status, and knows that he or she yearns for the impossible.

Our contemporary situation has enormous effects on the poetry written today, many of them not favourable, so it is important to remember that the marginalisation of poetry is a fairly recent phenomenon, dating back about 100 years. Before the advent of Modernism poetry did command a sizeable and reasonably widespread audience. Today, poetry retains an aura of mystery and respect that pop culture does not have or aspire to; it is still next door to religion, and few people would actually be *against* poetry, far fewer than in the western world are against religion. Poetry can produce the same kind of fanaticism as religion but it does not produce terrorists or bigotry because it lacks religion's dogmas. T.S. Eliot, a key figure in poetry's turning away from the populace, said that it did not matter if poetry had a small audience as long as it had a passionate audience. It did in Eliot's time and it does now. Many of poetry's readers are also writers – it is the great participant art – and they are so because they believe that only poetry can express the deepest truths, that it expresses the deepest meanings our lives can muster. This is a belief I hold, and I try to stay true to it in my own poetic practice. Saying this risks making poetry sound liturgically solemn, but humour is an important element of those deepest

truths, and I pride myself on having written comic lines and stanzas, particularly in poems of serious intent.

What poetry has lost is its role in popular culture, usurped by film, television, video games, folk song (poetry's closest relation), popular song and all the other myriad ways in which developed societies spend their time. However, I think it crucial that poets don't acquiesce in this loss readily; one of the problems of poetry since Modernism is that they have. My own poetry exhibits a tension between the wish to be part of folk culture and the wish to express most fully the deepest truths I can discover. This is difficult, for both poet and reader, but it can be a fruitful tension. It has been said of Modernism, I think by Donald Davie, that it rewrote the contract between writer and reader in favour of the writer. But once the writer gives up on a readership he or she descends quickly into self-indulgence, self-importance, gimmickry and obscurantism. Small wonder that few people read poetry these days. It seems to me important to maintain the concept of the general (intelligent, sensitive) reader and of the poem as a form of communication.

I find myself wanting to differentiate between "pop culture" and "popular culture." "Pop culture" now is the commonly used phrase but it is a fairly new one. We have had popular culture since we have had any form of society, but pop culture is recent: it is popular culture organised and badged for commercial purposes. As such it is often slick and superficial, more dependent on marketing than on substance, a product rather than an artefact, a commercial entertainment – whether a person, a work or an event – rather than an art. It is part of the "entertainment industry," and it is an industry, so speaking of its purveyors as "artists" travesties the word. Poetry is set against all this; it is arguably the least commercial of all the arts. It is not just a diversion to help pass the time; it demands activity from its audience, not acquiescence; it gives durable meaning to the times, and it helps us to understand, enjoy and endure.

Most people love the popular music of their teenage years. As a baby boomer growing up in the West, I was fortunate to reach those searching, questioning, challenging years when popular music became often much more than pop music – not just musically but in lyrics too. The Beatles had their first impact with pop songs written by others but by some miracle that success led to their writing of "She's Leaving Home," "Penny Lane," "The Long and Winding Road," "Eleanor Rigby" and a host of other graceful, lyrical almost-poems. They were not much affected by the folk revival but I was, and so were Bob Dylan, Paul Simon, Donovan and others, who brought its articulacy into rock music. Like many other, perhaps most poets of my generation, this was one of my main routes into poetry. One look at those lyrics on the page will show that they aren't poems but they were paths that led onto the poetry road. Nevertheless, even the best of popular music tends to be locked into its time rather than be for all time. One of my poems begins "When Jimi Hendrix and

Janis Joplin died/ pop music ended, at least for me....” When writing the poem I left a draft on the kitchen table. My younger son, then emerging into his teens, saw it and asked indignantly, “What idiot wrote that?!” Pause. “And who were Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin anyway?” The poem comes from a period of vinyl records, not CDs, and tries to understand the role of rock music of the period, not just refer to it:

The livin’ is easy

When Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin died
pop music ended, at least for me,
the microphones stopped waving,
the speakers sat silenced.
Full fathom five their fame would lie;
all those wonderful easy ideas
suddenly meant yesterday.

Cocaine Jimi wafted off
on a wave of woozy well being;
while Janis boozed and abused
that summertime voice
till death climbed up
into her raucous throat.

Those voodoo child, spoilt child
fertility figures could gloat
over every amplified movement. When youth
was undeniable, too strong for compromise,
they sized up an easy joke,
thumped out a flying, perilous grief.

Now try them under electric needles:
do fish start jumpin? Does the cotton grow high?

The title of course comes from a great composer who bridged the popular and high culture divide – an extraordinary achievement – George Gershwin. It is in part a private reference but one I hope doesn’t matter: I first heard Janis Joplin on a video clip singing “Summertime.” “Summertime” was like “Danny Boy” – everyone sang it, but Joplin made the song totally new and totally her own. Without my thinking about it all that consciously – writing poetry doesn’t work like that – the poem itself mixes “pop music” and high culture, with a phrase from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* linked to a buried reference to The Beatles’ “Yesterday,” and Hendrix’s “Voodoo Child” linked to ideas that structure Eliot’s “The Waste Land.” Joplin and Hendrix are understood as fertility figures

sacrificed for youth so that their listeners' adulthood might come in safety, but as with ancient fertility sacrifices, they are willing victims. This seems to me to have gone on being true with many pop heroes – they are spoilt children, their adulation received without being earned, and they play out the risk-taking and death wishes of their adolescent audiences. Youth is attractive but dangerous, the more so since my generation introduced drugs into youthful experience – something for which we will forever be culpable. The questions at the end of the poem, drawn from a greater musician and greater composer than any of my generation's figures, let alone Hendrix and Joplin, could be read as sardonic.

While my poems are not replete with pop culture references, when I look I find more than I would have expected: for example, Elvis Presley and The Beatles in a comic poem about the generation gap, "Natural Piety" (but the title comes from Wordsworth), Chinese knick-knacks in "The Last Emperor," Christmas carols and shopping centre "culture" in "Brightly Shone the Moon." Some appear in utterly serious poems, as another reference to The Beatles (I still love them!) in "Tapping":

Tapping

My love, that odd window knocking
 you no doubt remember
 I never heard
 "till there was you"

is simply the tapping
 of yellow-beaked Singapore birds
 as they fly from scrawny cats.

I hear it nightly, that tapping
 sharp in the air. You've gone and

all I hear now is clear and spare
 as if everything stood outside me.

Sentimental Beatles songs I play
 soar over flurries of cats and birds

– you once said the wish
 to recapture youth, to tumble over
 the cliff face of the past

"is the first sign of senility."
 In Singapore's absurd, befogging heat

I want desperately to write you

a poem of the scrawniest simplicity

to tap and beak inside you,
flown into a language
full beyond words

from the flurry of my feelings,
from the pit of my life
where I am now,
as dumb as the animals.

This is a love poem of a subdued tone, given that, like many love poems, it concerns absence. What I most like about the poem, and which it shares with many of the best popular songs, is its “simplicity.” It seeks an even scrawnier simplicity and unlike almost all popular songs, even the best, that simplicity serves a great complexity, “a language/ full beyond words.” That “language” might, I suppose, be the complexity of silence sought by the French *Symbolistes* and many religious poets, and it is appropriate for a poem driven by absence. Simplicity isn’t necessarily simple-mindedness.

No critic has ever praised my poems for simplicity and I don’t remember it being used as a term of praise for any other contemporary poets in reviews of their work. Yet simple poems with substance are the hardest to write and are, in their own way, more difficult than poems of intellectual complexity or technical dexterity. In my last individual volume there were two poems I was proud of: “Constancy” and the final poem, “An Act of Defiance,” whose last line gave the book its title. These are poems – I hope – of direct simplicity, the first a love poem and the second elegiac. The shorter is “Constancy”:

Constancy

I stared out on the midnight streets
of Canberra, so still they looked
frozen in time. The nearby
clock tower was stuck
at a quarter to eight, early
even by my blood and bones
like a wish that we
would never age,
from this instant. Canberra:
it’s what Australians like
to say about it – out of time
and stuck in a world of no
human’s making. To be alive
is to be moving

away from where we are,
 even in sleep. And I thought
 of you, as I always do, the better
 part of me, far and yet near,
 in a three hours different space.

This one constancy, as still
 as a winter street telling me,
 in a way that catches my breath,
 that time is only a window
 I could climb through
 and touch you,
 in life, in death.

The poem was inspired by a visit to Canberra, Australia's capital and a city created solely for that purpose; Australians' larrikin inclinations lead them always to mock it, as a way of mocking authority in general. I stayed in a hotel that looked out on the local coach station, where a clock's hands were stuck. In summer, Perth where I live and where my wife was, is three hours behind Canberra – Australia is a large country. The poem, now I look at it, works with oppositions of stasis and movement, clock measurement and actual time, and of death and life. The poem was written in, I think 2003. It's sometimes said that life imitates art. The poem was read at my wife's funeral in February this year, and it has grown in meaning for me, although I often struggle to feel those last lines as true.

Simplicity was never one of Modernism's values. Complexity, derived not only from its experimentalism and some of it wilful – as an honest reading of Pound, Eliot and Joyce will show – was at its core. At the time of Modernism's advent the state of poetry, and the state of the world, certainly needed a shake-up, and poetry must always be open to experiment. However, experiment is not valuable in itself – it is a means to an end. During and since the 1920s experiment has often been seen as an end in itself. In a review the word "experimental" or "radical" hits a note of praise while "conservative" or even "traditional" is damning. These should be descriptive, not evaluative adjectives. In a good deal of modern poetry being experimental is little more than a means of avoiding critical scrutiny.

My generation in Australia saw what have been called "the poetry wars," when poets were passionately divided between the more conservative who saw value in the Australian tradition, linked to British writing, and the young experimenters, rebelling against the war in Vietnam and Australian conservatism generally, drawn to bohemian lifestyles and American poetic experiment. This was the hippy era in the West. I began writing as part of the experimenters, but I was a late starter and still finding my way. I studied English at university as a

mature age student, and it was only later that I came to realise how university study had encouraged identification with the poetic radicals. I have long since burnt or thrown away my poetic efforts from that period and after reading Les Murray's work I became an apostate. That early thinking I now find immature, but such thinking still prevails in many poetry reviews and much literary criticism.

When we look back at the period of Modernism we find that a variety of writing was being undertaken, but the period is never read that way; it is interpreted in now conventional literary histories as if Modernism was the only important activity. It certainly was a valuable activity but the main reason for this wholesale Modernist takeover, I think, is that Modernism emerged as a confident force at the time that the foundation of English Departments was becoming widespread in universities. T.S. Eliot's brilliant essays gave them a rationale for existence and Modernism is perfectly suited to the temperament of university English study. Modernism's complexity needs research and explaining; even the explaining done by the poets themselves, as in Eliot's notes to "The Waste Land," needs explaining; it includes quotations from and references to many other works of literature, building up a (valuable) idea of literary tradition; it does refer implicitly and sometimes explicitly to a society in a period of fascinating, radical upheaval; and its experiments with form require a lot of literary knowledge. All of this is admirable and I don't want to seem a hypocrite: I wrote a doctoral thesis on Yeats (an ambiguous Modernist) and taught English, with Modernism one specialty, in universities for 35 years. English Departments tend to intellectualise literature; they are full of people who might be weak or strong but they are certainly intellectually strong, and they relish complexity. It is, after all, much harder to research and teach simplicity, or sensory communication, or emotional nuance. This is the reason, I think, why non-academic writers tend to be wary of English Departments. Writers, especially poets, work intuitively but literary criticism tends to work entirely with the conscious mind. All of this would be incidental except that the complexities of Modernist experimentation alienated many readers from poetry, for good and bad reasons, and they have never returned. Thus, a large part of the audience for poetry is a university audience, or a university-trained audience. Certainly the reviewers are.

I do mean "university-trained," not "university-brainwashed," and it would be easy to stereotype; I am talking about a tendency, not an absolute state. Nevertheless, it does seem to me that most poetry reviewing is wrong-headed, and that Eliot's "The Waste Land," the most famous poem of the twentieth century (I think in any language), has a lot to answer for. The greatest poets in English – Chaucer, Shakespeare, Pope, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Tennyson, Dickinson, Yeats, Hardy et cetera – balanced intellectual, sensory and emotional appeal, the appeal to the conscious and the unconscious minds,

and wedded “high art” to the strengths of folk, or popular culture. This seems to me what we still should aim for, regardless of the academic nature of contemporary poetic audiences. The most important experiences – of birth, love, death, friendship, family, of challenges, triumphs and failures – are shared between all humanity, and the tradition in English literature (by which I mean literature in English) of treating common themes in sophisticated ways that appeal to an inclusive, not just an artistically aristocratic audience is a noble one. A poetry that is directed at other poets or a poetry in-crowd is an eviscerated one. My attitude to the common reader is the same as Rilke’s towards God: we cannot know if he/she exists but that is no reason to stop looking for him/her. If you add women to his conception then Wordsworth was right: a poet is “a man [or woman] speaking to men [and women].” The literary hieraticism of Mallarmé or John Ashbery has no appeal to me; it is a kind of elitism and poetry needs to hold onto democratic principles. I enjoy authors who use language richly but who maintain that sense of literature as popular culture, such as Shakespeare, Hardy, Yeats, Mark Twain, Robert Louis Stevenson, Graham Greene and Philip Larkin. Intellectual snobbery is a curse, but many Australian intellectuals maintain a condescension or simmering contempt for ordinary Australians’ lives. I published a poem explicitly critical of this stance, its title drawn from a famous essay by Patrick White which expressed such contempt. White wrote that “In all directions stretched the Great Australian Emptiness... and the march of material ugliness does not raise a quiver from the average nerves.”² The poem is titled “Nights of Average Nerves” and ends:

Across all the television-greied,
 junk-mailed, ineffectual dog
 barking in a yard, ragged
 roses, milk carton suburbs
 intellectuals spread contempt
 as black as Vegemite, read reticence
 as simplicity, repetition as monotony,
 caution as selfishness,
 as if average nerves never shared
 the ludicrous intimacy of pain,
 or joy hovering on the ridiculous,
 as if they had no past, a sunshine
 where no shadow of thought
 could ever dare fall.

Gazing above the trees, they miss it all.

² Patrick White, “The Prodigal Son,” *The Vital Decade*. Ed. Geoffrey Dutton and Max Harris. Melbourne: Sun Books, 1968: 157.

The valuing of the ordinary is a constant and key theme of mine – I am hardly alone in using the ordinary but I don't know of other contemporary poets who have its importance as a regular theme. Again, I don't think any critic has discerned it, except for Shirley Lim in a back cover comment on *All the Time in the World*. If we are to have any experience of the transcendent it will, I believe, come through the ordinary, and in my poems I am often trying to link the two. Patrick White in fact expressed this belief and the same argument could be made for T.S. Eliot, but in both their cases the ordinary does seem fairly literary – very literary in White's case. One of my poems explicitly deals with the link:

At Greenwood, a Meditation

In a humdrum household
occasional cats jackknife over fences,
slink across the path, wide
eyes on guard, whiskers atwitch.
For these dark creatures
my mind wanders
over the other neighbourhood
they sidle silently from
and what water or milk
they hope to lap from
in my head.

Now the hunched and
rickety figures of houses
slip to one side, in trees
sharply cut blood coloured sap
flows up from each root,
salt scatters from the shaker
over tablecloths lit with stars,
dark, stiff outlines of hills
brood, mysterious, that will
in time become again
suburban, lupin dressed hills...

I never can call to them
nor fix how they come
but when I see a mouth
lick up the dabs of sunlight
celebrate/ what has then begun,
the twitch of whiskers,
the startling tongue.

The means to this link is imagery and it was a deep belief in the value of imagery that kicked me from the radical poets' side to the other when I was younger. The image speaks beyond literal meaning; it is a language not available to science, philosophy or other forms of rational discourse and goes to the heart of what poetry is about, speaking to the rhythms of our breath and blood as well as to our intellects. I tried to express this in one imagery-laden poem that was difficult to write because it resisted any rational editorial thought:

Light the first light of evening

*Light the first light of evening, as in a room
In which we rest and, for small reason, think
The world imagined is the ultimate good.*
Wallace Stevens

In solitude
the things of the world
might become
small birds
or letters
that ripple off the tongue

and drag us along
afraid
of what we leave out:
birds beating in the dark,
things which fall off
the wings of their names;

then, within
a tight thing,
within ourselves,
at evening: the world
beyond words,

insistent, in the fragile,
stammering light.

Nearly all the poets I admire are great users of imagery. You rarely get such rich imagery in popular culture, and almost never imagery that aspires to speak beyond language – parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme, ole man river, Mr Tambourine Man, streets that have no name... even the best of them stay close to the ordinary. Songs rely on the ineffable mystery of music to do the work. A poet must use the very different music of language. Part of that music can lie in different poetic forms, and I have written, in particular, couplets, quatrains and

sonnets, including a good deal of rhyming. However, one lingering lesson from Modernism is a deep wariness of artificiality, so free verse remains the norm for most contemporary poets. Free verse, as Eliot and Pound noted, is never completely “free,” and I have often used off-rhymes and buried rhymes – assonance if you like – to give poems their structure. This is a pleasure since for any poet a fascination with and delight in language is a prerequisite for writing well; I suspect this is not true for prose writers, who can be drawn by theme, plot, character. However, except for comic or satiric purposes, I do not like language that draws attention to itself, unless that is the subject of the poem. I like the old axiom, “Art is that which hides art,” and a use of language that is skilful enough that the reader doesn’t notice it, at least on first reading. The language of the poem is like a window that the reader, or listener, sees straight through, to the poem’s content. This is exactly the opposite of the conception of language advocated by postmodern (mainly French) theory. In an introduction to *Acts of Defiance: New and Selected Poems*, titled “The Humanity of the Poet,” Robert Gray identified my attitude as that of “a Protestant temperament”; I had never thought about it but I was brought up in the Church of England, pretty loosely, and I am content with this description. I think one might also detect the temperament in Islam, but Islam in practice is more restrictively coercive. I feel little empathy with the elaborate baroque of Roman Catholic ritual and the work of poets such as Gerard Manley Hopkins, with their linguistic brocade. The poetry I prefer is poetry that demands sincerity of purpose, and I believe, contra Oscar Wilde, that in matters of importance sincerity, not style, is the important thing; Wilde, it seems to me, was always trying to escape reality. Gray at the end of his introduction summed up my work as “a poetry of what George Orwell had final critical recourse to – decency,” and I was immensely pleased to read that comment. In it I can detect my working class roots, for the working class have no opportunity or respect for prancing about: they have to be, as Australians used to say, fair dinkum.

I try to write a poetry that uses language as fully as possible, much more richly than popular culture, but which might seem to have a ready place in ordinary lives, as popular culture does. I believe, as Pound learnt from the ancient Chinese, that “Only emotion endures,” and I try to write poems that evidence a demand to be written, that provide a range of tones and depth of varying emotions – that is, poems which are true to life as we have to live it in the contemporary world. Although art is always much less than life, art might be a significant part of it. At the emotional level, our life is not much different to life in Mediaeval times or in Shakespeare’s world or in the future, whatever brave new technology might hold.

I try to write honestly, in poetry and in prose, but if someone dismissed what I have written here as narcissistic rambling I would have little defence. This essay just provides some of my views on what I have attempted; in the end

the poems have to speak for themselves, and perhaps I had best end with a previously unpublished poem that perhaps says all the above much better:

That Other Country

The skies of your life are unerringly blue
and you have no plans to rearrange
your expectations; but when the licensed official
says the word, you, and those
closest to you, immediately shift
to another country. No matter that
you do not seem to move, and others
do not recognise your departure, you
are now in exile. The word
will be a visa, in your passport
an indelible stamp, and your passport
now full of pages that you will never use.

There are no tense allegations:
your arrival is an application
for permanent residence, approved
without question;
your questions do not matter.
The government of that country
is entirely different. We know
that we will all die
but here your friends live each day
in the expectation of life. Now
you will live each day, each hour, each
minute in the expectation of death.
In that country there is no capital planning,
no budgeting, no small talk, no migration queues,
no day to day distraction
from the dictatorship of death. Forget

the life of the mind, although the citizenry
is full of meaning. Where everyone is a refugee
the body asserts its supremacy, the economy
is measured out in medicines and pain.
You will wonder that there is no system of justice,
the only wars are within you,
the UN convention signatures are
all missing, yet ethics and care are everywhere.
There gravity pins you to the earth
more tightly; the very air can be exhausting.
Move slowly in this place

if you must move
where the noisiest sound is silence.
There is no resisting the journey
or putting it aside – later, later...

No use to declare
stark ignorance of the language.
He says the word, “cancer,”
and already you are there.

Poetry Collections by Dennis Haskell:

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