

From  
The  
Weather  
of Words

POETIC INVENTION

by

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*On Becoming a Poet*

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"You, Andrew Marvell" by Archibald MacLeish was the first poem about which I felt passionate, the first that I thought I understood, the first that I actually wished I had written. My own poems—the few that I wrote in my adolescence—were feverish attempts to put "my feelings" on paper, and little more. Their importance, at least for me, their only reader, was exhausted by the time they were written. In those days, my life was one of constantly shifting weather, and the world within was rarely in sync with the world without. No wonder the linearity, the cool emotional order of "You, Andrew Marvell" appealed to me.

The poem was saying things that I wished I could say. The same feelings that had troubled me, and whose victim I was, now seemed, coming from the poem, sources of pleasure. When I read it for the first time, I knew little about poetry. I didn't know who Andrew Marvell was, nor did I know where half of the places were that MacLeish mentions. I only knew—what was most important for me then—that I was the figure "face down beneath the sun." I was the one whose consciousness was connected to the nearing of



the night, to its shadow creeping always closer. This description of the distant night's inevitable approach, even as it reflected my own increasing awareness of mortality, was calming. I now felt located in a vastness, which, in my real life, had made me feel lost. The emotions that overwhelmed my solitude took on a shape, one that I found pleasing no matter how often I returned to it. I had no idea of how the poem accomplished its magic, and somehow, despite my many readings of it, I was never moved to inquire.

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*You, Andrew Marvell*

And here face down beneath the sun  
 And here upon earth's noonward height  
 To feel the always coming on  
 The always rising of the night:

To feel creep up the curving east  
 The earthy chill of dusk and slow  
 Upon those under lands the vast  
 And ever climbing shadow grow

And strange at Ecbatan the trees  
 Take leaf by leaf the evening strange  
 The flooding dark about their knees  
 The mountains over Persia change

And now at Kernanshah the gate  
 Dark empty and the withered grass

And through the twilight now the late  
 Few travelers in the westward pass

And Baghdad darken and the bridge  
 Across the silent river gone  
 And through Arabia the edge  
 Of evening widen and steal on

And deepen on Palmyra's street  
 The wheel rut in the ruined stone  
 And Lebanon fade out and Crete  
 High through the clouds and overblown

And over Sicily the air  
 Still flashing with the landward gulls  
 And loom and slowly disappear  
 The sails above the shadowy hulls

And Spain go under and the shore  
 Of Africa the gilded sand  
 And evening vanish and no more  
 The low pale light across the land

Nor now the long light on the sea:

And here face downward in the sun  
 To feel how swift how secretly  
 The shadow of the night comes on . . .

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It wasn't until years later, after I had written and published my poems, that I took a close look at it. I remember the mesmerizing power its list of places had over me, how it gave grandiose definition to my vague and fugitive thoughts about death and time passing. But what I had experienced this time was something else. I was aware, as I had been in the past, that the poem seemed suspended between times. Only now that suspension seemed to feature a strange circularity, each event marked by a newness but eerily resembling the events that had come before. The trees at Ecbatan shared something with the grasses at Kernanshah and the gulls over Sicily. Beginning with "And" and ending inconclusively with an ellipsis, the poem as a whole hints at this suspended circularity. Not only does the first line begin with an "and," but the second line does as well, so that the poem seems to insist on its own connective character and, moreover, to allude to something that is ongoing, that won't stop: "And here face down beneath the sun / And here upon earth's noonward height . . ." In other words, "You, Andrew Marvell" is both about time and in time, about motion and in motion. It is both linear and circular, and what it suggests is not just the simple diurnal round of night and day, but the more tragic rise and fall of civilizations.

And yet the poem's speaker seems oddly removed from what he describes—not just because he is situated temporally at precisely noon ("earth's noonward height"), but because his feeling is unattached to tense or to personhood. It exists in an overriding infinitive, out of time but responsive

to time: "To feel the always coming on / The always rising of the night: // To feel creep up the curving east / The earthly chill of dusk . . ." Just as "and" is used in the first two lines to underscore the additive elements of the poem, so "always" is used in the next two lines to characterize with reasonable insistence what the infinitive "to feel" can embrace, which is to say "everything."

In another significant gesture of encompassment, the poem's first rhyme of "sun" and "on" is also its last rhyme, not only marking the duration of the speaker's attention but bringing the poem around to what feels like an ending, except that here the ending is a reenactment of the beginning. And it is not only the repeated rhyme that accomplishes the poem's circularity, but its minimal punctuation as well. A colon is used twice, once four lines from the beginning and again four lines from the end. In each symmetrical instance, it signals a pause, which will be followed by the additional pause of the stanza break. The lengthening and doubling of the pause helps to emphasize in yet another way the centrality of the infinitive "to feel."

But somehow the urgency that usually attends feeling seems missing. What is suggested, instead, is that "to feel" embodies a temporal character, and though different from the circular, suspended temporality it responds to, it nevertheless appears related to it. Moreover, because of the ambiguous and, I believe, elaborate way "to feel" is presented, the poem appears to be acknowledging a response that we've already had while at the same time urging us to participate in an extended reconstruction of it. To feel the night come, its advent in various and ravishing manifesta-



tions, to be swept up in the vastness of time, to feel it all inwardly, face downward in the sun, is what the poem seems to insist on, but with a languor that is in direct contrast to the heated urgency of the lover's speech in Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress." (In that poem, to which this one obviously responds, no dispassionate view of time's devastating power can be enacted: Love, the act of love, the pleasure it seeks might offer the illusion of sidestepping the inevitable, but the lovers cannot stop the sun, all they can do is make it run; that is, make time pass more quickly, join their heat to the sun's heat.) In MacLeish's poem, there is definitely "world enough and time." Its serenity, the casual way it ticks off exotic places, carries with it the implication that there is something beautiful about bending to what is inexorable, and that mediating on one's mortality can seem a form of transcendence.

Another aspect of MacLeish's use of "to feel" is how it internalizes the huge impersonality of time, and how it makes the visual record of ascending night into a private matter instead of simply a geographic one. We are asked to feel the reach of the poem's vision for as long as we can. And this is probably why it appealed to me as a teenager. The experience the poem offered was that of an immense privacy at the center of which was a figure whose imagination provided the purest and most far-reaching provocation for feeling.

I also undoubtedly liked it for its apparent simplicity. I had no idea that a highly sophisticated craftsmanship was responsible for its careful disclosures, that the virtual absence of punctuation gave it an added fluency, lending its

geographical accretions a hypnotic inevitability. I knew that meter was involved in the enchantment I felt, but I didn't know how important its strict maintenance was to the poem's meaning, that keeping time was the surest way the poem had of adhering to its subject, that the pause and stress of its iambic tetrameter line was as sobering and as steady as nightfall.

The poem's lack of punctuation is one of its most pronounced formal features, the one most responsible for its fluency and the casual way its modifiers shift, clinging momentarily to one noun or verb, then joining forces with another, sometimes following, sometimes preceding. This happens most obviously and most strikingly in the second and third stanzas, first with the rhyme word "slow" and then with the oddly reiterated "strange": "To feel creep up the curving east / The earthy chill of dusk and slow / Upon those under lands the vast / And ever climbing shadow grow // And strange at Ecbatan the trees / Take leaf by leaf the evening strange." "Slow" in stanza two is how "the ever climbing shadow grow[s]," but in stanza three it is also how "leaf by leaf" the trees at Ecbatan absorb the evening. The effortless way "and slow" is coupled with "and strange" three lines later might have been compromised into syntactical fussiness had commas been used. And in an equally understated way, "strange" at the end of the second line of stanza three enacts a doubleness that suits its meaning. It seems at first, in a graceful inversion, like a modifier of "evening." But that's only if we place a comma after it. If the comma is placed before it, then it modifies "the flooding dark" in the subsequent line. Not only that, but the "knees" belong to the "trees," as if rhyme, in compensation for the missing



punctuation, were assigning meaning. This works if we place a period after “knees,” but doing so only forces the next three lines into an implied sentence of disturbing flatness: “The mountains over Persia change // And now at Ker-manshah the gate / Dark empty and the withered grass.” With a comma after “knees,” however, the line would be subordinated to line four of the third stanza, which could end in either a comma or a period.

And one could go on from there, endlessly changing an imaginary punctuation, creating new shades of meaning, new emphases, but it would be fruitless, since the poem works best just as it is. Its ambiguities are essential not only to its fluidity, but to its vast suggestiveness as well. The poem urges us to read its lines one after another without stopping, yet insisting, it seems to me, on the integrity of each. The line, after all, and not the sentence, is its basic unit. It has no sentences other than the ones our playfulness—or, more likely, our insecurity—would have us invent for it.

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One might think that my ability to analyze and comment on the technique by which “You, Andrew Marvell” asserts its particular hold on the reader would alter my response to the poem. But my response now is pretty much what it was then. I am still that figure face down in the sun. The experience of the poem has somehow overcome the poem’s message of

mutability. And the sense that I am still myself—myself essentially as I was—is as present as the knowledge of how swift, how secretly the shadow of the night comes on. It is as if the poem’s power to enchant carried with it an obligation to reassure.

Something beyond knowledge compels our interest and our ability to be moved by a poem. As an adolescent, I may not have known anything about the intricacies of poetry, but I was beginning to think about mortal matters the way an adult does. And that more than anything made it possible for me to respond to “You, Andrew Marvell,” and, thereafter, to other lyric poems. When I say “lyric poems,” I mean poems that manifest musical properties, but are intended to be read or spoken, not sung. They are usually brief, rarely exceeding a page or two, and have about them a degree of emotional intensity, or an urgency that would account for their having been written at all. At their best, they represent the shadowy, often ephemeral motions of thought and feeling, and do so in ways that are clear and comprehensible. Not only do they fix in language what is often most elusive about our experience, but they convince us of its importance, even its truth. Of all literary genres, the lyric is the least changeable. Its themes are rooted in the continuity of human subjectivity and from antiquity have assumed a connection between privacy and universality. There are countless poems from the past that speak to us with an immediacy time has not diminished, that gauge our humanness as accurately and as passionately as any poem written today.

It is not difficult to imagine that most people who have lived on this planet have felt in considering the coming of



might the advent of their own mortality. And what they felt did not seem bound by the particular century in which they lived. It is clear that Archibald MacLeish was bound—at least when he was writing this poem—by a notion of time having more to do with the passing of events, human life being one of them, than he was in a theoretical, abstract, or strictly twentieth-century vision of time. For in “You, Andrew Marvell” the earth does not turn. It is darkness that is active. It is darkness that happens to the world just as surely as death will happen to the one face downward in the sun. The poem is bound by a schema that is no less true for standing apart from what science tells us is true. Like most lyrics, it reminds us that we live in time and allows us to feel a certain joy in that knowledge. The losses which are inseparable from experience take on a certain sweetness and resonance.

It is likely that the lyric, either by its formal appeal to memory when rhyme and meter are used, or simply by its being an artifact, provides a redress to its message of human evanescence. “You, Andrew Marvell” is about loss, but the naming of places, even as they fall under the cloak of dark, is an act of restoration. Cities and civilizations are taken away, but new ones appear. The ellipsis at the poem’s end seems to imply that another cycle of replenishment is on its way; just as the word “always,” used with such emphasis at the start of the poem, implies the superabundance and availability of time.

It is hard for me to separate my development as a reader of poems from my career as a poet. If my readings have any acuity or sensitivity, it is probably because I have paid such close attention to how my own poems worked, and to which ways and to what extent I might improve them. This mutual dependency is always reflected in the work. A poem will make continual reference to an experience while at the same time call attention to itself as a vehicle for meaning.

Although I no longer wish I had written “You, Andrew Marvell,” I wish, however, that I could write something like it, something with its sweep, its sensuousness, its sad crepuscular beauty, something capable of carving out such a large psychic space for itself. It is one of the poems that I read and reread, and that reinforces my belief in poetry, and that makes me want to write. There is something about it that moves me in ways that I don’t quite understand, as if it were communicating more than what it actually says. This is often the case with good poems—they have a lyric identity that goes beyond whatever their subject happens to be. They have a voice, and the formation of that voice, the gathering up of imagined sound into utterance, may be the true occasion for their existence. A poem may be the residue of an inner urgency, one through which the self wishes to register itself, write itself into being, and, finally, to charm another self, the reader, into belief. It may also be something equally elusive—the ghost within every experience that wishes it could be seen or felt, acknowledged as a kind of meaning. It



# Response Topics

## ON BECOMING A POET

could be a truth so forgiving that it offers up a humanness in which we are able to imagine ourselves. A poem is a place where the conditions of beyondness and whinniness are made palpable, where to imagine is to feel what it is like to be. It allows us to have the life we are denied because we are too busy living. Even more paradoxically, poetry permits us to live in ourselves as if we were just out of reach of ourselves.

According to the *Poetry Foundation*, Mark Strand (1934-2014) "was recognized as one of the premier American poets of his generation as well as an accomplished editor, translator, and prose writer.... Named the U.S. Poet Laureate in 1990, Strand's career spanned five decades, and he won numerous accolades from critics and a loyal following among readers."

In his essay "On Becoming a Poet," Strand discusses the first poem he read that made him passionate about poetry: Archibald Macleish's "You, Andrew Marvell." In Part I of this essay, Strand not only discusses how this poem affected him when he first read it, but he also explicates the poem—i.e., explains how the poem unfolds and how the poem's different elements (such as its language, structure, and tone) work together to create a total effect on the reader.

"You, Andrew Marvell" is a Modernist poem that follows different "rules" than sonnets and other Renaissance poems follow. For this reason, Strand's explication in Part I helps us understand how the poem works and what the poem means. Moreover, in Parts II and III, Strand also discusses the key traits of lyric poetry in general and the reasons why lyric poetry has the ability to move us.

1. "You, Andrew Marvell" - In Part I, Strand explicates "You, Andrew Marvell," explaining how the poem unfolds and how the poem's different elements work together to create a total effect on the reader. From Part I, what are the most illuminating or intriguing observations Strand makes about how "You, Andrew Marvell" unfolds and how specific elements of the poem help create its aesthetic effect and meaning? As a student of imaginative literature, why do you find these specific observations intriguing or illuminating? Quote and respond to at least three specific observations Strand makes about "You, Andrew Marvell" and why they illuminate the poem for you.

2. Lyric Poetry in General - In Parts II and III, Strand also discusses the key traits of lyric poetry in general and the reasons for poetry's ability to move us. What are a couple illuminating or intriguing observations Strand expresses about poetry in general—e.g., about why Strand became a poet, about the benefits that poems provide for readers, about how and why poetry moves us, about where lyric poems come from, about why people are inspired to write poems, etc.? Or, alternatively, what are some illuminating or intriguing observations Strand offers into related themes such as time, mortality, truth, love, etc.? Quote and respond to at least two observations Strand makes about this topic.