

POETRY AND DEMOCRACY IN THE AMERICAN TRADITION

Prof. Michael Kuelker ~ SCC English ~ September 16, 2020

Some questions invoked by the title of this presentation ...

What does democracy mean in relation to poetry? What is the tradition of democracy in poetry? What makes a poem 'democratic'? How do poets represent democracy differently? What kinds of experiences are represented in literature classes at the high school and college levels in the books they read? Which poets get assigned?

1. poems about democracy

Langston Hughes – “Democracy” – “I, Too”

2. the legacy of Walt Whitman

Leaves of Grass [1855] – “I hear America singing” – arising from a conviction that both poetry and democracy derive power from the capacity to take disparate parts and create a unified whole

from “Song of Myself”:

I speak the pass-word primeval, I give the sign of democracy,
By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their
counterpart of on the same terms.

Through me many long dumb voices,
Voices of the interminable generations of prisoners and slaves,
Voices of the diseas'd and despairing and of thieves and dwarfs,
Voices of cycles of preparation and accretion,
And of the threads that connect the stars, and of wombs and of the father-stuff,
And of the rights of them the others are down upon,
Of the deform'd, trivial, flat, foolish, despised,
Fog in the air, beetles rolling balls of dung.

Through me forbidden voices,
Voices of sexes and lusts, voices veil'd and I remove the veil,
Voices indecent by me clarified and transfigur'd.

3. political poems

Carolyn Forché – *Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness* [WW Norton 1991]

4. diversity, inclusion and ‘the canon’

5. uncovering submerged histories

Tracy K. Smith – “I Will Tell You the Truth About This, I Will Tell You All About It” [*Wade in the Water* – Graywolf Press 2018]

Patricia Smith – “Skinhead” [*AGNI* 1992]

Layli Long Soldier – “38” [*WHEREAS* – Graywolf Press 2017]



Joseph Brodsky (1940-1996) in his essay “Less Than One” speaks about life in a totalitarian society and the sustenance he and his cohorts derived from literature:

If we made ethical choices, they were based not so much on immediate reality as on moral standards derived from fiction. We were avid readers and we fell into a dependence on what we read. Books, perhaps because of their formal element of finality, held us in their absolute power. Dickens was more real than Stalin or Beria. More than anything else, novels would affect our modes of behavior and conversations, and 90 percent of our conversations were about novels. It tended to become a vicious circle, but we didn't want to break it.

In its ethics, this generation was among the most bookish in the history of Russia, and thank God for that. A relationship could have been broken for good over a preference for Hemingway over Faulkner; the hierarchy in that pantheon was our real Central Committee. It started as an ordinary accumulation of knowledge but soon became our most important occupation, to which everything could be sacrificed. Books became the first and only reality, whereas reality itself was regarded as either nonsense or nuisance. Compared to others, we were ostensibly flunking or faking our lives. But come to think of it, existence which ignores the standards professed in literature is inferior and unworthy of effort. So we thought, and I think we were right.

from *Less Than One: Selected Essays* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux 1987)