

A Sense of One's Self:

Poetry in the Therapeutic Context

Michael Braziller, founder and publisher of Persea Books, introduced this season's poetry series by moderating a roundtable that brought together three writers whose experiences illuminate the ways in which poetry can be used to cope with and, at least momentarily, transcend potentially devastating circumstances. "Serious illness both terrifies and isolates us," Braziller reflected. "To some extent each of my guests came to poetry, and poetry came to them, as a means of articulating a crisis."

In 1980, **Karen Chase** began working at New York Hospital in White Plains where, over the course of a decade, she read thousands of poems by psychiatric patients. During that time, she met a young man named Ben, who had given up speaking and withdrawn from social interaction. Chase, whose own poetry has been widely published, initiated an exercise with Ben, a verbal "exquisite corpse" in which she wrote a line of poetry and then passed it to Ben, who added a line of his own, going back and forth until they reached an organic stopping point. Chase's book, *Land of Stone*, presents the poems that grew out of her work with Ben over the course of two years, and chronicles his growing expressiveness. Chase read several of the poems from the book, which, given the fragmentary style in which they were written, were surprisingly cohesive and affecting.

Madge McKeithen fell in love with poetry in a hospital bookstore. In 1997 her son began experiencing stiffness in his muscles and joints, which became progressively worse. He soon exhibited signs of a cognitive disorder, a degenerative illness that ultimately was diagnosed as sub-cortical dementia. At the time she was coping with the crisis, McKeithen was beginning to write poetry. As she left the hospital one day, she noticed a collection of Emily Dickinson's poems and stopped to read from it. The companionship and sustenance she drew from these poems grew into her book, *Blue Peninsula*, which offers a narrative of her son's illness interspersed with the poems that helped her gain insight into her own feelings. McKeithen noted that she became fixated with the power of words to describe the subtlest variations of her emotional life.

For **Alicia Ostriker**, author of eleven volumes of poetry, writing as an attempt at self-therapy began in her thirties. It was an effort, she said, "to exorcise where it all went wrong." In the beginning, she didn't see the poems as therapeutic, but rather as diagnostic, showing her how she really felt. She discovered that she had an "author-ego," a self she had been submerging, but that didn't like being submerged. In her perception, this explained why her poems were often "violent and murderous." Her use of poetry as a tool for self-revelation reached its apotheosis when she composed *The Mastectomy Poems* six months after having surgery for breast cancer in 1990. Ostriker read several of these poems, including "Mastectomy," which was dedicated to her surgeon. Commenting on her writing process, she said that the metaphors for the poems didn't come to her during the experience, but later, when she gave herself permission to make poetry about it. "The task," she said, "is to go deep enough so that you get it right."

The three writers showed a curiosity and respect for each other's experiences that spoke volumes about how poetry can create a bridge between isolation and insight. Braziller, whose efforts as moderator reflected his own deep appreciation for the impact of poetry, noted at the evening's outset, "The music and states of awareness in poetry have been a catalyst to find courage, acceptance, and even renewal." *A.L.*

Our Life in Poetry: John Donne

Marie Ponsot, the guest poet for the first session of this season's poetry course, *Our Life in Poetry*, initiated a unique approach to examining the work of *John Donne*, the poet under discussion. She asked each member of the audience to read a line from Donne's poem "The Canonization." The involvement of many readers, Ponsot felt, accentuated the incantatory nature of Donne's writing, with each voice serving as a contribution to the fluency of the poem. The exercise was visibly, and audibly, effective in drawing the audience into the life of the poem.

Michael Braziller, Publisher of Persea Books, conducted the course, held on Tuesday, November 27. As a preface to the evening, he pointed out that in Donne's day, poems were rarely distributed in print, but were instead read aloud to small groups of patrons and friends. Ponsot, whose collection *The Bird Catcher* won the Book Critics Circle Award for Poetry in 1998, noted that reading Donne was what first made her want to write poems.



Marie Ponsot

Braziller read "Good Morrow," and followed with the observation that the poem, despite having been written 500 years ago, still had the power to affect young people today. Ponsot revealed that the poem recalled her own youthful anxieties, when, as she put it, "I watched everybody, and I watched them out of fear." She noted that in an age marked by geographical discovery and exploration, Donne was engaged in discovering himself, his passions, and the possibility of love. In this quest, he developed an attitude towards women that, while it could hardly be described as feminist, was expressive of an extreme reverence. "There are very few writers about love," Ponsot added, "that imply the valuing of the partner the way Donne does." As if to underscore the ascendancy of compassion in Donne's poetry, Ponsot proudly wore a button declaring, "Still Against War."

After the audience read "The Canonization," a poem that Braziller indicated was more complex and angry in tone than "Good Morrow," Ponsot read "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning." She characterized it as the poem that most reveals Donne as a metaphysical poet. Ponsot's ability to maintain a connection with the audience while reading, allowing Donne's thoughts to register clearly, helped bring the poetry alive.

Following Braziller's reading of Donne's "A Hymn to God the Father," Ponsot read her own poem, "Dancing Day," an imagining of her consciousness after death. The last line of this moving poem might well have characterized the dialogue between the poet and her audience throughout the evening. "We are all more than we thought/ And as ready as we'll ever be." *A.L.*

Transformations:

How Fairy Tales Cast Their Spell

In February of 2007, Lincoln Center Theater's staging of Tom Stoppard's epic *The Coast of Utopia* served as the point of departure for the Philoctetes roundtable, *Imagining Utopia*, moderated by Lincoln Center dramaturge **Anne Cattaneo**. Once again, a Lincoln Center production, this time of Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, served as inspiration for a roundtable, entitled *Transformations: How Fairy Tales Cast Their Spell*, held on Friday, November 30. This time Ms. Cattaneo appeared as a panelist, along with *Cymbeline* director **Mark Lamos**, who has helmed numerous productions on Broadway and at Lincoln Center.

Jack Zipes, Professor of German at the University of Minnesota and author of *Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution and Relevance of a Genre*, moderated the event. He began by proposing that fairy tales are created in an attempt to search for truth in a world where truth seems to have vanished (a predicament that evinced a sigh of familiarity from the audience). **Roger Rahtz**, Clinical Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at New York University Medical Center, responded by stressing that while enchantment in fairy tales may begin to reign in the course of a quest for truth, the ominous backdrop of a darker reality looms. **Maria Tatar**, Professor of Germanic Languages and Literatures at Harvard University, offered the interpretation that fairy tales depict the paths taken on a greater journey from darkness to beauty.

Cattaneo, who remarked that these were precisely the themes addressed in *Cymbeline*, went on to compare the arc of the fairy tale to the experience of watching a play, calling it a ritual in which the audience witnesses a profound transformation. This transformation, she said, can be very psychically resonant. Mr. Lamos noted that a fundamental ingredient in this process is the suspension of disbelief, recalling that when he read fairy tales as a child he found in them an instant identification of his own anxieties. He added that Shakespeare's plays are not far from being fairy tales, observing, "If Cordelia lived, *King Lear* would be a fairy tale." Professor Tatar, however, sought to establish a stronger distinction between Shakespeare and fairy tales, noting that Shakespeare offers depth and psychological analysis, while fairy tales depict one-dimensional characters that offer no "critical distance."

Donna Jo Napoli, Professor of Linguistics at Swarthmore College and an author of children's fiction, confessed that it was strange to hear people talk about the suspension of disbelief. "When I write," she said, "I believe every detail." While she conceded that the plot lines of fairy tales, if viewed from a distance, portray behavior that seems insane, a close look at drastic human behavior in the real world reveals detailed decision-making processes. For Professor Napoli, the fairy tale depicts what an individual is willing to give up in order to be a decent person.

The panelists went on to discuss the sources of fairy tales, the elasticity of the many versions of each story, and their roots in a rich oral tradition. Professor Rahtz noted the preponderance of female protagonists, and the ways in which fairy tales allow children to identify with several characters at once. Napoli bristled at this remark, stating that if a child doesn't identify with one particular character, the writer didn't do his or her job. Napoli's belief that fairy tales should present a character that confronts and endures evil, both internally and externally, underscored the resonance that the genre continues to have for readers young and old. "There are a lot of children," Napoli concluded, "who need to know that you can face horrible things, and you can still find a way to live decently, even if it's only inside your head." *A.L.*

The Future of the Stock Market

When asked what inspired her to become the first woman to buy a seat on the New York Stock Exchange, panelist **Muriel Siebert**, author of *Changing the Rules: Adventures of a Wall Street Maverick*, explained that she simply wanted to work for herself and be paid equally. By breaking through the long-standing gender barrier on Wall Street in 1967, Ms. Siebert hastened social change in a stock market that had yet to experience the revolution of automated technology. In the late 1960s, nothing was automated. As panelist **Bernard Madoff**, Chairman of Madoff Investment Securities, pointed out, the arduous task of finding stocks to purchase for a buyer was done entirely by telephone. This look back at the evolution of the stock market was the starting point of a discussion about a future in which the influence of social and technological changes could transform the market on an almost daily basis.

The market is one of the few industries in which the cost of doing business, in terms of commissions, has gone down, translating into a clear advantage for occasional traders.

Justin Fox, business and economics columnist for *Time* magazine, moderated the roundtable, held on Saturday, October 20, and began by raising a central question: Has the restructuring brought about by technology and automation actually made the market perform better? **Robert Schwartz**, author of *Reshaping the Equity Markets: A Guide for the 1990s*, commented that prior to automation, collecting market data was a painstaking process, often performed by doctoral students who were known as "slaves." With the availability of automated, universal market data, he went on, there is a greater degree of transparency, but it will take more time to gauge whether or not this translates into greater market efficiency. But how is efficiency defined? **Ailsa Roell**, Professor of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University, cited Pareto efficiency, wherein no person can be made better off without making another person worse off. This hard reality was reinforced by Mr. Madoff, who clarified that the for-profit nature of the market means that a buyer always knows, or thinks he knows, something that the seller doesn't, and vice-versa. At the same time, Madoff continued, the market is one of the few industries in which the cost of doing business, in terms of commissions, has gone down, translating into a clear advantage for occasional traders.

Josh Stampfli, the architect of automated marketing structures at Madoff Investment Securities, shed light on the mechanics of how technology can change the market. As brokerage firms send their workflow to Madoff Securities, Mr. Stampfli must create programs that manage their risks. His objective is to develop algorithms that minimize risk and, with proper oversight, perform the same function formerly carried out by several trained brokers. Putting the complexity and precision of technological advances into perspective, Madoff pointed out that trades that took 20 seconds to execute in the 1980s now take one-tenth of a second, which in fact engenders new considerations about risk and competition.

With a combined experience on Wall Street of over 80 years, Siebert and Madoff provided historical perspective and uniquely informed insights about what might lie ahead for the stock market. While capitalizing on their expertise, Mr. Fox also mined the technical and academic acumen of the other panelists as he guided the discussion to address aesthetic changes, like the eerie silence that now pervades once-bustling trading rooms; the role that panic and mob mentality play in the market; and ethical concerns raised by more widespread, democratized trading. *A.L.*