

Critical Dialogue

Poetics, Self-Understanding and Health

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Abstract

In the thick of the global plague, Richard, Justin and Valery agreed to hold a conversation on the topic of poetics, self-understanding, and health. An analysis and discussion of this trinity requires love of poetry and philosophy. Both supreme human practices take common root in mythology and religion, and also share a notorious categorical divide, that of reason against affect. Is this Platonic divide indeed categorical, given both practices rely on language and creativity to compose their meaning? Interestingly, the practice of poetics does not have the reputation for boosting one's health, in the mainstream understanding of that concept. If anything, poetic practice gained notoriety for corrupting one's mind and, possibly, life. Like philosophy? We touched on these and other classical aporia, on the political struggles in American and Australian poetry. Here is a written record of this encounter, countries and miles apart, three persons simply getting to know one another.

Key words: poetics, philosophy, conflict, self-understanding, health

Valery: Today we are discussing poetics, self-understanding and health with two very special guests, Justin Clemens and Richard Deming. In ordinary usage, the problem of health is typically medicalised. We tend to look at the concept of health via the logic of medicine or pharmaceuticals, psychology, and so on. However, historically there seems to be a strong connection between the practice we call poetics and this ambiguous notion of health (like that of human). That's the link we'll try to explore, and we'll start by revisiting an ancient conflict between poetry and philosophy, manifested in the philosophy of Plato, student of Socrates, the master of questioning abstract meaning in relation to the everyday.

Justin: Thank you, Valery. Hi, Richard! Thank you for the invitation. I guess we should talk about a high-falutin' aspect of philosophical interpretation, a really foundational one (at least for the history of so-called Western thought): that of Plato's *Republic*, but also elsewhere in this great philosopher, where relationships between something like poetry and ill health are made almost essential. Plato, one of the most eminent students of Socrates, who perhaps makes himself the most eminent, partially through his style, the writing of his dialogues, you know, high-class advertising for the academy. Basically: come and study at my school, you will learn all these things! Plato is also

an enthusiast of literature. As he starts to think more and more about the political turbulence of his time, and the relationship between tyranny, democracy, and other forms of imperium, all these different forms of politics, he wants to say, depend on the irrational and self-denying, self-damaging, essentially mad whims and affects of persons who are not properly educated, not properly under control. Both personal health and political health, mental and physical, rather depend on a good state, a strong state, with a rigorous education. Above all, we must avoid a state for which the thought of philosophers is dangerous to the point where, like Socrates himself, they may be murdered by the democrats of the state for allegedly corrupting the youth and for impiety. Philosophy, in Plato's form, takes poetry as a kind of unconstrained enthusiastic speaking — *enthusiasm*, the influx of a god — where what comes out of the mouth is maybe captivating, but it speaks the low part of your soul, and it speaks from the low parts of our bodies and spirits. It infects, disturbs. Yes, it captivates us, but that very captivation is dangerous, both personally and politically. So a very stringent, foundational, fundamental division between philosophy and poetry is usually assigned to Plato. It has consequences for what poetry is: how we think about it, how we speak about it. Philosophy places poetry firmly in the category of unreason or irrationality as a result. There are many people who try to respond to that, to neutralise the danger of poetry, but you can never get around this in Plato: the danger of poetry for ideal personal and political health.

Valery: Thank you, Justin. I like that you've situated Plato in the actual social context of his day and age. My understanding is that Plato's divide between poetry and philosophy -- poets and philosophers -- is based on particular circumstances, and that he was making an informed philosophical judgement on the relevance of poetics within a society. Is that correct?

Justin: Yes, for a number of reasons. I guess in a society such as the participatory democracy of Athens, but also for the non-democratic societies of the ancient world. Ancient Greece is not a single unified entity but there are many cities, city-states, and they have *radically* different forms of governance. One emblem of that would be Athenian democracy versus Spartan military-slave society. It should also be remembered that Ancient Greece is at the edge of empire: it's not an empire itself, it's a small, shitty irrelevant place, of no real interest, not to the great empire of Egypt, nor to the greatest empire that dominated the world, Persia. It's a marginal collection of heterogeneous modes of governance. In somewhere like Athens, part of the problem for someone like Plato — who'd been in extremely turbulent situations of war, of tyrannical takeover, of the restoration of so-called democracy, of the murder by the democratic state of his teacher Socrates — was that something very damaging becomes apparent in democratic debate, i.e. people can discuss all sorts of matters (which is very important to Plato, as we know from the *Dialogues*), but what regulates that discussion? If in the end it's poetry that regulates the discussion rather than reason *per se*, things are going to get out of hand. So democracy ends up spanning its own capacities through tyrannical figures who might present themselves as democrats, but actually are masters of the poetry of dissolution of death and destruction. I am sorry to use this example, but one of the things I used to do was follow President Trump on Twitter. Several of my friends even said he was the greatest Twitter poet in the world. When you read his tweets, you know that guy can write. You don't know what he is saying sometimes, sometimes you certainly don't like it. But, oh my god, that guy can tweet like a ... he is the master of the tweet! I even believe that Twitter was saved by Trump in many ways. 'Sad!!!!' 'covfefe,' and so on are crazy crazy utterances, but nonetheless inspirational, which make you feel something, make you react, make you think: wow, I may not like this guy, but, whatever he's on, it's unbelievably captivating and weird. In fact, whether you hate or love Trump, everyone is united in loving these crazy words, pseudo-words that he introduced into the world: they're the topic of everyday discussion. There are many little Trumps around all the time, right? Plato certainly had recognised many of them. It would be my opinion, sorry to say, but the opinions

that are generated in and around by someone like Trump are exactly the sorts of inspired but yet terrifying discourses licensed ultimately by poetry, to which Plato wanted to say: Stop! Hang on, this is actually damaging!

Valery: One way to continue our discussion is to demarcate between philosophical and poetic practice. It seems that not only do they have different methods, -- if there is a method of doing poetics, -- but also that they elicit different responses from authors, listeners, readers and spectators. The affective embodied reaction one experiences by registering some poetic twist of truth seems different to a rational, cognitive reaction to a proposition. While that may be the case, do poetry and philosophy have to be mutually exclusive? Plato banished poets from his ideal state, which implies that the philosopher and the poet can't coexist within one individual. That's the conflict in Plato, the drama. However, it seems to me that they can be complementary. By practicing poetics and philosophy at the same time or in the same context, may we reach particular insights in a more complete way?

Justin: Yes, these points you make are really important, Valery. I would say a number of things. First of all, Walter Benjamin, the great German Jewish critic, said, yes, Plato expels poets from the republic, but don't forget it was from the *ideal* republic, and we don't live there yet. In the meantime, and this is the second point, as everyone says about Plato: while he seems to abominate poets, he steals their techniques and uses poetic means continuously in his own work. Thirdly, he does so, yes, but as long as they are under the control of reason, not in an unconstrained way. This brings us to a fundamental problematic: what discourse is going to govern another discourse? To come back to Trump and Hillary Clinton at this point: something that the painter Helen Johnson said to me was that Hillary Clinton may be a voice of reason, but she is always speaking down to you, whilst the voice of Donald Trump is always speaking to and with you. Even if it's nasty, even if you don't like it, that voice is a voice from below, not a voice from above — which is the voice of the ruling classes. This is a problem for Plato, too, because Plato has to recognise who speaks from above, the tyrant, and who speaks from below, the poet, their discourses — even though they seem opposed — are actually linked by a subterranean bond. The only thing that breaks that bond or enables us to traverse it is the dialectics of someone like Socrates where, through rational questioning, you stop, you bring to a halt the fusions of the poets and the dictates of the master. Socrates again and again is one of the first and greatest Marvel superheroes (a character who keeps coming back, right, even after his death?), he is always the superhero of these discourses, and what is his heroism? His heroism is to listen to everyone and to force them back on a point that they themselves are incapable of answering. To stop, precisely, the poetry flowing, or to stop the tyranny flowing, and to expose in that very halting discourse (the aporias that Socrates knows) something that is neither the whisper of evil from below, nor the orders of tyranny from above. That is something that Plato is hyper-conscious of, and also hyper-conscious of the difficulties of dealing with.

Valery: We will leave it at that, as another inconclusive insight in the style of Plato's *Dialogues*. Now, philosophy and poetry seem to employ different styles of language; they are different types of discourse. Philosophy is interested in clarity of thought, lucidity, in coherence, and, preferably, originality of philosophical treatment. While poetry often creates an ambiguous semantic space, offering meaning one can interpret in all kinds of ways. Thanks to poetic practice, one inevitably explores the nuances of the word, and the poet opens up new gaps, new spaces for understanding meaning that is tied with an affective dimension.

Richard: I would say that poetics is that position between philosophy and poetry, one that holds that poetry is an enactment of an understanding of language, and how that understanding affects how you articulate something. In essence, this is a kind of expressivist model predicated on the

notion that when we speak we are expressing our largely unconscious, sometimes conscious understanding of how language works and how we are to articulate experience or ideas or encounter the other. Poetry--in its precise attention to the very word itself, in a line, words in a line, with the way that they connect, or don't connect--requires a deep understanding of language, and how to make multiple possibilities of meaning to co-exist. Poetics is basically a stance in which the poet is consciously thinking about all these questions that are expressed through the poems as the poems, and not merely summoning the daemon or filling out the specific needs of prosody. So, the poems aren't *per se* an argument about aesthetics, but they are an expression of a tacit argument. Poetics is the way to become responsible for and to those ideas of language that are being expressed via the poems.

The more specific example of the stakes and consequences is the tension between political poetry and lyric poetry. There is an insurmountable divide, one that ultimately comes out of what Justin in his characteristically articulate and cogent way was expanding on, beginning with Plato. With political poetry, there is an idea that the poet is articulating an idea that will communicate directly and perhaps somewhat narrowly to the listener, that the listener will recognise themselves in that language and find the poet as the representative of a certain life, a politics of that life, and thus the poem is also a call to action, based on that identification. The language has to be very clear to make that action happen. Now, lyric poetry or aesthetic poetry is less explicitly invested in and often directly opposed to that thinking, and is informed by the aesthetic belief that one makes the conditions of experience possible through the language, and that the listener has their own experience of that language that is reproduced in the listener; not directly: it's their experience of someone else's experience, but it's not dogmatic, it's not directed, it's not saying, "ok, you do x and then therefore this action or belief happens." In fact, the more that you can put a name of an emotional response, the more limited that poem is.

Poetics is built out of all of these questions, these tensions, weighing the losses and gains of both. What do you lose if you are being really clear, and the tropes you are gathering are meant to be directive, as opposed valuing complexity and nuance and a multiplicity of interpretations, which arguably can fragment? Of course, from that democratic lyric position one would say, "no actually it empowers the individual rather than creating movements." Walt Whitman is an absolutely beautiful example of this generative tension because he is always uncomfortable with having to decide which it's going to be, and tends to realise: "if I am a national bard, I will lose the possibility of individual experience, yet if I focus wholly on that, then none of us will come together." This shuttling back-and-forth makes him so vital. That struggle is why at least in America you have virtually every poet who will name Whitman as a predecessor, and thus radically disparate and sometimes antithetical aesthetic positions will find their home in Whitman's oeuvre. Of course, ultimately that is an ambiguous place, a place of complexity and ambiguity.

Justin: Well, I thought Richard's distinction between aesthetic and political poetry — the latter controlled by clarity and order and an idea that need to be conveyed, and the former as polymorphous and seething with meanings and complexities that tear it from a shared destiny and make it a fragment of singularity even more important than the whole — I can see the modernity of this. I want to pick up on this distinction, which is in many ways a descendent of the Platonic ones we were speaking about before. I want to ask Richard about national poetry. What you said about Walt Whitman is fascinating: he is one of the great American national poets precisely because he is the person who wants to be both the political poet and doesn't want to be, and wants to give the absolutely individual experience and can't give it, because he wants everything at once and he also knows that he can't have everything at once and that to get everything at once will vitiate his

achievement — but if he doesn't attempt it, then he won't actually have the achievement! That's something interesting and emblematic about North American poetry of the 19th century, and something about North American poetry in particular. What other poets are in that trajectory? Claudia Rankine? Could you speak to these questions: first, around the paradoxical nationalism of poetry, and, secondly, regarding the inheritors of Whitman today, still as a dominant form of North American verse?

Richard: I think it's a great question, and I do get worried about coming across as the American exceptionalist. Whitman is interesting because he gets picked up throughout South America and in other places as well; he was more important in England first than he was in America...

Justin: In France as well ...

Richard: Yes, absolutely, France as well. In the 19th century, America still had to discover itself nationally, in terms of what that identity means, other than being simply a bunch of people who are being thrown together, and thus needing to develop an identity separate from England. I think what Whitman is getting at is that democratic impulse, which is not necessarily unique to America. When he was writing, particularly in the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, that identity and perspective still needs to be discovered and that becomes an interesting proto-Freudian conundrum that one has to invent one's own tradition, a tradition that will give birth to oneself. I think it's still going on: Claudia Rankine, my colleague, is a great example of someone who has broad intellectual impact but who actually comes from a relatively avant-garde background and publishes formally complex work. *Citizen*, for instance, is written in prose, but calls itself an "American lyric sequence," and that descriptor is a question of poetics: what does it mean to call that poetry, and how does it change our response to the sentence? A lot of people can read the book and not realise it's poetry, but if you say, "no, this is a poem, what does it mean in terms of how we read it" a reader needs to pay attention to that formal element.

Having taught *Citizen* in poetics classes, I felt that I had to get students to read the work not just in terms of its ideas. Formal elements are important. It is necessary, since *Citizen* is indeed poetry, to look at the actual construction of the sentence or the way that the "you" is a contact point between the text and the reader. The whole thing is written and addressed to "you," to an addressee, so we need to explore how the use of that pronoun, which is dislodged from a specific subjectivity, creates a relationship between the text and the reader. Also it means that there aren't truth claims in a way if we read an objective, critical, or scholarly text. Claudia Rankine's work, strictly speaking, isn't reportage, so one has to be thinking not whether it's true or false, but rather what is the experience of reading this language on the page. Claudia is interesting because she is of the generation slightly older than I am--maybe ten years--that came of age just as the language poets in America, and around the world, were bring back to the fore this question of the politics of poetics and looking to foreground the constructedness of poetry: what are you doing when you say "voice," for instance, what are you doing when you say "image," what does it represent? This attention to mechanisms questions all those things that have become static questions or invisible questions of a romantic, post-romantic, confessional lyric poetry. In bringing these issues back into the mix, while also not giving way to the complete Russian formalism, Claudia and the poets of her generation, many of them, wanted to recoup the lyric poem, even having been dipped into waters of the skepticism of language poetry and the literary theory that was prevalent at that time. Amanda Gorman, the recent inaugural poet, gave an amazing reading, clearly inflected with politics. Yet, recently the Nobel Prize in Literature just went to the American poet Louise Glück: what if we had her as the inaugural poet? It would be a completely different inaugural poem. Glück's is a personal lyric, and while it's justice-reaching, justice-pointed, it's not directive, it's not explicitly political. It would

have demanded much more of the reader's investment in its creation of meaning. Justin, did that help clarify?

Justin: That was absolutely great. The way that you spoke about Rankine and Gorman reconnects the most radical formal experimentations in the history of aesthetics versus politics to an idea of a questioning about what we are — or what you are, I should say! — as Americans and as American citizens. The address is to a nation in the Whitmanian and Rankinean line, as you say: the Gorman poem does that, or it attempts to do that with a few breaches in syntax, but it is also still reflecting upon an idea of what it is. That's the sort of thing that is so great about Rankine, really, is that she goes all the way down into the hyper-formal experimentation of the most radical kind *and* also has an idea of questioning that is inherently essentially political as well, of the politics of the place she's in. And articulated in a way that's every time different.

Richard: I think that's right on. So let me come back to you: to what degree do you feel that tension in Australian poetry and poetics, maybe in your own practice (I think that would be very interesting to hear)?

Justin: One of the things you've pointed out about the United States — underlining united, underlining states, underlining America! — and exactly as you said about Whitman (and, of course, Emerson the transcendentalist is also a part of that story): not only has this to do with a foundation and a declaration of independence, a war, a new political organisation, but then also (and once again to underline the difficulties of the situation) a civil war founded on the question of slavery. What is at the centre of this democracy: is it a slave society or not a slave society? That question is a part of the difficulties of that situation, right? That's extremely pressing, extremely contemporary. We've seen it in the states, in Rankine's poetry, in Gorman's choice for the inaugural address, really important and crucial questions, the #BLM and so forth. Really important questions, which are ongoing, and life and death questions as well. Now Australia, as you also said, has a completely different history. I would say that Australia fights wars of dependence rather than independence: Australia is a white, Anglo-settler colonial nation. We just had Australia Day, or Invasion Day as it's called, and its foundational aspect is colonial dependency and an absolute exclusion of the people who were here already, of the Indigenous peoples. That is a different situation from America. It's not that there weren't all sorts of other horrors here — slavery and so on — but it's not the same thing. I would say two things about poets in Australia. First of all, national poets are always lacking in Australia structurally as a result, because of the dependency on the verse of England or Great Britain. So it's a land of aggressively derivative poetry, in which the derivation is primary. It's a bit Baudrillardian in a sense of simulation, but also because it's constantly dissimulating and repeating its settler-colonial roots. In Australia, the poets who have an authority that no-one else can have — here I think of Indigenous Australian poets, the voice of Lionel Fogarty in particular, although there are many old and young Indigenous poets writing — their voices are absolutely unique and singular in the world today. Voices you have to listen to. There are other people as well, like the Greek Australian poet Π.Ο. who writes vast epics about everyday life, twenty four hours in a suburb of Melbourne, for instance, *Fitzroy*, or a weird history of an art gallery called Heidi, and so on. That makes the historical and colonial distributions, the rifts at the hearts of the constitution of the countries quite different.

Richard: That was beautiful, fascinating.

Valery: To highlight the point Richard made about practicing aesthetic poetry; in this sense poetics provides the conditions of experience, created through the use of language. We live in a world where people are often (due to their upbringing and education) deprived of the opportunities to embark on a poetic dialogue with oneself, to try to express that which is haunting them: what do

these thoughts and feelings mean? How do I express them to make sense of what on earth is happening in my own soul?

Richard: Do you want an origin story, Valery?

Valery: Anything instinctive!

Richard: I think I came to poetry because of philosophy. It came at the time when I was reading a lot of philosophy, and a lot of it was the work that I still read, Emerson, or Nietzsche, or the stoics, -- because I was in the moment of trying to figure out my own life. I have an ongoing problem of always feeling like I don't quite understand my native speech. I am a native speaker who feels always like it's my second language. Often, I don't quite feel like I understand what other people are saying; I don't feel like they understand what I am saying. So, it was a way of feeling I'd read philosophy and then turn to poetry, like Wallace Stevens who I know Justin is also an admirer of, poets who foregrounded their wrestling with subjectivity. In a way that wasn't just a "barbaric yawp", to quote Whitman. I was really trying to think through one's own subjectivity, and it was a way of feeling that happening when I read the poems, and then there is a natural step to saying, well I want to do that, I do not just want it to move through me, I want to also to have my experience of language out on the page, so I can look at it, and try to make sense of it as an outsider, as an alien to myself. I think that's one of the things that poetry can do, and that was clearly the reason why I turned to it. It is still an ongoing way, and it's a way of slowing down perception. Percy Bysshe Shelley called poets the "unacknowledged legislators", while I like to think about poets as unlegislated acknowledgers.

Justin: I keep thinking about this Australian poet John Forbes who died prematurely in the late 1990's, a fantastic Australian satirist. He used to say: poetry is like philosophy, it just gets you there faster! So, rather than slowing everything down, it just cuts out all the other crap around it, which is having to prove stuff and give evidence and footnotes. Poetry just says the truth, and does not have to say anything more about itself. I guess that is not entirely at odds with what Richard is saying. The thing about poetry that I still find unbelievably mysterious is that, blah-blah-blah most of my life is blah-blah-blah-blah-blah — endless fucking trains of signifiers from everywhere! — and all of a sudden something will happen, someone will phrase something or something will be phrased in such a way, and you go: oh, my god, that is incredible, I can't stop thinking about it, but I don't know why! I can think: it's not that good, or it's not an original thought, or I just don't even get it, and yet at the same time it cut itself out, it incises itself into me, I don't know what to do with it, and it has a captivation that keeps me hooked. At the same time that can also be quite pacifying: I can recite it to myself again and again, like sucking on a dummy, or I can recite it again and again to myself and work myself up more into more of a frenzy. Poetry does not seem foreign to any affect or mood or possibility or even level of language. The mystery of it is still just that. I wasn't going to read this, and I don't even know who the translator was, it's just I've had it for a long time, but think of that Du Fu poem which begins: 'After the separation of death, one can eventually swallow one's grief, but the separation of the living is an endless unappeasable anxiety'. I can't tell you why, but that is amazing, right? Death is better than losing friends who are alive? This was over a thousand years ago, and this translation still hits me, and I think: oh my god, it is an endless unappeasable anxiety, and then I feel choked and desperate. How does that happen? That's weird, that's mystery in verse, as Mallarmé might say. That's something that gets me, and it can be something as amazing as Du Fu, or it could be — unfortunately — Prez Trump's tweet "Sad!!!!" I am not going to forget that either: it gives me massive anxiety, for different reasons! They're not the same thing at all, but there is something in both that captivates and cuts.

Valery: Somehow certain poetic turns of language draw out affective responses full of meaning we've never encountered before, -- I agree with Spinoza, who says that our affective states are unnameable and extend into infinity: we can only try to tag them with words, -- even if it's an encounter of anxiety, having an infinite number of masks and every single one of them is ours, -- human. Such experiences are tied with self-understanding. You pass through those states, anxieties, despair, the tickling of love, or infatuation, even if it's not your infatuation, and they guide us through a particular inner territory, conducive to self-understanding, to an understanding of what I *am* in this moment in time. That is, they certainly guide those people who are attentive to their inner world's movements, to the fact that every single day, every single hour I am a new man. There are a few poems that you, gentlemen, would like to share.

Richard: I chose a poem by Robert Creeley called "The Language":

Locate *I*
love you some-
 where in

teeth and
 eyes, bite
 it but

take care not
 to hurt, you
 want so

much so
 little. Words
 say everything.

I
love you
 again,

then what
 is emptiness
 for. To

fill, fill.
 I heard words
 and words full

of holes
 aching. Speech
 is a mouth.

Valery: It's so disjointed! I was looking forward to you reciting it: the way I read it was completely different to your way, Richard. Your understanding of the poem is more intimate, so I was wondering why you chose this poem and what it says about your own search for self-understanding?

Richard: Well, Creeley was my teacher. I sought out working with him, in part because he had been a fundamental force in my thinking about poetry. Growing up in New England, America, being an arty kid who read poetry, you get shoved Robert Frost down your throat a lot, it's everywhere, and there is a comfort to Robert Frost: "Two roads diverged in a yellow wood" and "Something there is that doesn't love a wall". Even if there are things I can still admire about Frost, when I was a kid what I responded to was this general certainty that he had: the lyric poem was an articulation of a certainty. There was a moral foundation that he was pretty serious about. So the language is aphoristic and you feel like you are meant to memorise it. I can see the value in that, but there came to be a certain point in my life where that certainty or moral certainty or that authority just would not sit well with me. I could not find my experiences articulated that. Then I heard Creeley's work and what I loved about it was its hesitancy, its wanting to be an action on the page. It was as if the idea is coming to him and often he become critical of that, certainly self-conscious, so that the language trips over itself and hesitates and feels like it's searching for a thought or creates tension from one line to the next, that kind of hesitancy or anticipation. So that it's not meant to be something I am supposed to just take in. It's an activation of all these possibilities that felt to me incredibly liberating and freeing. I even like the idea of: locate the phrase "I love you --- say everything". It has this break between "words" and "say everything", in which, ironically, words... say everything. That's something that Creeley there is playing with that idea of "words", fumbles through the words, "say everything". But it's also "words" and then there is an injunction: "say everything", don't hold anything back, say it all. The break in that line allows for that to happen, while it's also this complete sentence. I found this to be just incredibly free. It was as if self-knowledge could only come first through self-consciousness, as an anxiety without shame, to paraphrase Nietzsche. That was the poetics that I wanted to immerse myself in, that understanding that language was itself a condition of experience, and that it does not resolve it:

I heard words
and words full
...And then there's a blank space...
of holes

So he says "full", goes into silence, he finds language "of holes", "aching", and then "Speech" itself "is a mouth", which I take to being expressive: not expressing a thing in every element of it, but expressing all of our understanding of language.

Valery: Richard, while reading that poem did you discover your first language? In that poem and that form, in the constellation of meaning you discovered in Creeley, was there a sense of resonance, of understanding... of something convincing?

Richard: It was a sense of recognition of my own subjectivity being enacted. What I recognised was a sense of self-consciousness and that very word is a choice. What Creeley does with this poem is make it feel like I am choosing my words. Most of the time, we do not necessarily feel that. The three of us feel that right now, because we know that someone else is listening and we are trying to communicate an idea and also demonstrate our mastery of the material and be interesting at the same time. So there is an awareness of reaching for that language, yet it's always there: every word is a conscious and unconscious choice. Creeley enacts that, and I felt that this was the space I could inhabit that anxiety of slipperiness of meaning and feel like this was the forum for it. Nothing is riding on it, I am not trying to talk the cop out of giving me a ticket, I am not trying to get a higher wage, I am not trying to have someone to give me their phone number. There aren't consequences, and I can just focus on the act of the choice, and also the rejection of it. That's what I love about

the Creeley poem, too, that it reaches and rejects, it goes back, continues over itself. That's what I wanted to have: the act of the mind finding itself.

Justin: I really loved that poem, loved your rendition of the poem, too, Richard. Like Valery, I did not read it like you, and it's massively different as a result of hearing you read. I was impressed by what you said before about nothing riding on it: the law, money, and phone numbers (which I am presuming is sex) are three major forms of calculation that we make in our lives, but poetry must be something in excess of law, money, and sex, if I can take that as one of the messages of what you said. I was struck by two things as you were reading. One, to go back to something that Valery said about Spinoza: a poem names a particular formation of the infinite that otherwise can't be expressed, to come back to your expressiveness. I had that kind of feeling: a poem is a tag for an infinite mode. Then, secondly, to come back to the thing you said about choice: yes, it's all about choice, but who is making the choice? Then I thought, well, obviously the ancient idea of inspiration or the muse or the god — actually, the god makes the choice for you! But if you're relatively atheist: the infinity of the material world (maybe that's a Romantic thing to say) makes a choice; something in the language that one speaks makes the choice for you. But it does bring the phenomenon of language and decision to the forefront. Also, in the case of the Creeley poem: the problem of love and the other, the relationship between you and the other. It is neither inside me nor outside me, I am making it, and I am not making it. Not just hesitations, doubts, suspensions, but, as you said, anxiety without shame — that's what that made me feel!

Would you like me to read now? It's an early Wallace Stevens poem called "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon" from *Harmonium*, his first book of poems. I love this poem. It's well-known in North America, and much anthologised. It's a poem you might even learn at school, if people are taught poems at school anymore. It's a straightforward poem that uses a relatively simple language, a meta-poem about consciousness:

Not less because in purple I descended
The western day through what you called
The loneliest air, not less was I myself.

What was the ointment sprinkled on my beard?
What were the hymns that buzzed beside my ears?
What was the sea whose tide swept through me there?

Out of my mind the golden ointment rained,
And my ears made the blowing hymns they heard.
I was myself the compass of that sea:

I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw
Or heard or felt came not but from myself;
And there I found myself more truly and more strange.

This poem is very simple. "Not less because in purple" — I am an emperor, we are all little emperors of our ego, not less. We descend at night time, descend in "the western day", "through what you called/The loneliest air, not less was I myself" — nothing in the world is going to change my imperial egotistical destiny. "What was the ointment sprinkled on my beard?" — this is a magnificent place, why? Because it's me: I am magnificent. Even in listening to my own magnificence — that's the interpretation I'd like to offer of this poem — which is sovereign, literally imperial, I descend like a god. Hymns, gold, title, the tides, I control it all, religion, nature, and so on. "I was the world in

which I walked", and everything here comes from me. But it's in the excess of yourself that you become alienated from yourself, and you find yourself "more truly", but not in a way that can be described, because of course it's also "more strange". So, a way out of the imperium of the self that accompanies us continuously, like this poem also says: maybe there is no way out, maybe the rupture will be in the excess of your own imperium. In that "more truly and more strange" you will find that "I is another", as Rimbaud says, or that you are not at all yourself — even though at that moment you're most totally yourself. That's one of the reasons I chose the poem, and one of the things I like about it: at the very heart of imperium, can an emperor still hear themselves?

Richard: One of the things about poetry is that it asks us to focus on the placement of the words. So if we look at that last line: "And there I found myself", and it could have just said that and ended, fullstop; but then it qualifies, "more truly and more strange", which is that paradox that it's more true because more strange I found myself more truly myself? Or is it the finding: look, this is how I find myself, I find myself truly, but the word being modified is "found" and "more strange". That's what we do with poetry: we stop and look to see which word is being modified, and if I look at it in that way then it's a comment back on "found", and how does that change it, rather than saying "I found myself to be more truly myself"? That changes our understanding of the poem. That process of experiencing his own imaginative process, that being the revelation of the self, and it being both an expansion and alienation. The amazing thing about Stevens is that every poem of his seems to have all of that, all at once. Dickinson may be the only another poet who can match that sense of the potential for revelation always being present in every line.

Valery: Beautiful. I can only add that I find myself every second, but not every second I find myself being strange. Strange can denote many experiences, and one of them is not necessarily alienation, but freshness, being born anew. I guess when a baby is born, coming out of the womb through the tunnel, she feels very strange [particularly if the brightest artificial light blinds your first experience].

Let's try to tackle the relation between poetics and health. On the very surface of the official or mainstream culture, poetics is not considered alongside any debates about health. Perhaps that is an instance of a rather serious misjudgment, stemming from the lack of understanding of what poetics is about. One way to approach this issue is to recollect Plato and consider his rational therapy of the soul.

Justin: Traditionally, philosophy is a therapy, and one of the great Socratic injunctions has been understood as to prepare yourself for death, prepare yourself to die well, to drink the hemlock. For Plato, the difficulty of Dionysian poetic captivation is that it's not directed towards your health at all. Poetry, in the end, is not a good therapy, it's one that's making all of us sick, and that's why we need a better or a higher therapy, of a cold reason. A reasonable, simple-minded version of Plato. The other thing about poetry is that you can be made very sick by these kinds of devotions, they don't help in any direct way. At the same time they're absolute and non-negotiable, and open the possibility of completely other, currently unimaginable forms of health both for individuals and for polities. People often called great Romantic poets mad, like Friedrich Hölderlin, who did really have a terrible breakdown, but his visionary poetry is absolutely crucial to history: the German language has changed, what can be said, what can't be said, our destinies have changed by this. That's a kind of health, both personal and political.

Valery: I'd like to bring this discussion closer to the everyday reality, and the ways the notion of health is perceived by people who may think of poetics as something you are exposed to during

your leisure time or at university, at best, rather than as something essential to self-understanding and health.

What we have established at the very minimum is not only that poetics can unveil and create new meanings and forms of expression, that poetics and politics cross paths and swords, but also, as far as our affective world is concerned, that it can cause embodied disturbances that Plato, the conflicted philosopher, opposes. Our contemporary world is deeply suffering from anxieties of all kinds, and the pharmaceutical industry makes a hell lot of profit out of this misfortune. We try to smooth the biochemical levels out, so that people no longer feel these thoughts and vexing states. Allow me to make a final point based on my own experience and observations. I'd argue that health, in a way, lies in one's capacity -- that ought to be developed -- to traverse some of these complex somaesthetic states that we want to sedate. Deep waters of grief and many other troubling moments of being seem essential to a richer experience of life, which can be unjust, traumatic, and damaging. One's health and strength -- or vitality -- can be expressed in terms of one's capacity to deal with those states, if possible, to understand them, and to understand your-embodied-self via the vantage point of those states.

Our common conception of health is far removed from this interpretation: we should not experience those states, they say, because such states undermine the conventional idea of well-being. However, it seems to me that being able to (not necessarily savour but to) *be with* them is a mark of vitality. Poetics is a means to an understanding of the self in the world, a learning curve, and some of those states are a part of it.

Richard: Poetry, philosophy, poetics -- all of this is the antithesis to the capitalist drive. I would agree with you, Valery, that there is an anaesthetising that occurs, and we can see that in terms of the ubiquity of entertainment, and all these things dull the senses. Poetry and philosophy are meant to *slow-down*, and *increase* one's ability to focus. John Ashbery has a great line about the experience of experience, and that happens in the field of a poem. Much of that comes from its difficulty, from its complexity. There is also a problem with the educational system which teaches these things as if they are elite, and you have to have read the Western canon to be able to understand Stevens or Samuel Beckett. Whereas very often if you bring a poem to someone and don't couch it in those things, they can have a response to it. Most of the time it's the language that they have seen, it's the language that they know. If they aren't overwhelmed by the sense that literature or high art are somehow separate, then they will allow themselves to be attentive to their own experience. That is the slowness of it, the complexity of it, the way that it makes you aware of your processes, these are the very opposite of the heightened distraction or anaesthetisation that capitalism seeks to in order to keep us all hooked.

Justin: I agree with everything Richard said. I'd finish with an anecdote, which is about my older daughter. Everyone in my family hates me and my poetry. Whenever I wander around the house, reciting any poetry, my older daughter puts her fingers in her ears and says, "Shut up, dad, please stop, I am going to die, I've never been so bored". I can take it that it's not the most appealing thing in the world. A few years ago the same daughter came home from school where she'd memorised an entire poem by Judith Wright, a mid 20th century Australian poet. The poem was called 'Drought Year', an extremely savage poem about a terrible drought with horse skeletons standing and dingos crying in the background, and so on. And I was like: well, how did you learn that, why did you learn that, you hate poetry! She said: one of the teachers recited it and I just loved it, so I remembered it. Then she lisped this incredible poem that has descriptions of extremity and terror, which are both of the natural world, but also the depredations of settler-colonialism in Australia. Actually, these poems also stick because they are themselves testimonies to unfinished historical business that is

still a part and parcel of our lives, and they have to make a claim on us (sorry for being melancholic about it) for the world of the dead and the unsettled symbolic debts we have not paid. In some sense, poetry is a testimony to the things that all of us would rather forget in our imperial emporium. That was my experience of my daughter remembering it and it seemed to me very significant.