



Poetry Is a Moan Just Beyond Delirium

Bill Wolak

I started dabbling with writing poetry as a teenager looking for ways to explore my obsessions, desires, and anger. It was the sixties, and I bought a guitar and tried my hand at writing song lyrics. I literally came to poetry with the expectation that it could improve my songwriting abilities. Music, in those days, was my entire world, and I was under the spell of Leonard Cohen, Judy Collins, Joni Mitchell, and The Incredible String Band. After taking a summer creative writing class, I discovered what poetry could do, and I never returned to lyrics. I quickly discovered poets who wrote more challenging works than the music to which I was listening. I discovered Michael McClure, Allen Ginsberg, Kenneth Patchen, and Kenneth Rexroth.

So my path to poetry began, more or less, with the Beats. McClure's *Dark Brown* and his *Meat Science Essays* along with Ginsberg's poems like "Who To Be Kind To" astonished me with their daring possibilities of personal experience in poetry. Through the Beats, I discovered Philip Lamantia, Bob Kaufman, Lenore Kandel, and little by little, the French Surrealists became irresistible to me. Paul Eluard, André Breton, and Robert Desnos transformed my notion of what a poem could be. Later, I studied Comparative Literature at Rutgers University with Nathaniel Tarn, and he introduced me to the English Surrealist poet and collage artist John Digby. Digby, perhaps more than all the others, had a profound and lasting influence on my writing

and my life. I traveled to England to meet him, and then we visited Paris together, where he introduced me to many of the Surrealists he knew such as Joyce Mansour, who I later translated, Ted Joans, Jimmy Gladiator and his wife Salomé, Abdul Kader El Janaby, and Haifa Zangana. Later, Digby moved to the States, and we've been friends and collaborators since the Seventies.

In the summer of 1972, I received a scholarship to attend the Aegian Arts Center on the island of Aegian in Greece. I spent the summer writing poetry and reading Greek literature. There I met poets like Alan Bold, Sinclair Beilas, and Alan Ansen—my first real experience of what another friend has called “the international drift.” Also, I was introduced to three poets who have influenced me: Constantine Cavafy, Odysseus Elytis, and George Seferis. In those days, I was more impressed with Elytis and poems like his “The Mad Pomegranate Tree” than Seferis’ “The King of Asine” or any of Cavafy’s historical poems. However, the use of history and myth in both Cavafy and Seferis made a lasting impression. Later, I became interested in mysticism and studied Sufism, Taoism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. But up until about five years ago, I wrote mainly love poems in the surrealist mode. Then I began work on a very different book *The Nakedness Defense*. This is a book of what I call erotohistorical poems that stem from my ongoing interest in erotology. It’s based on an actual governmental “department” or “office,” The Office of Unfamiliar Carnal Pleasures according to Suetonius, that was established by Tiberius to document his innovative erotic practices and investigations. Nothing, of course, remains of such an “office;” nevertheless, my own findings in the form of poetic anecdotes is offered in these poems as a similar undertaking. What I have attempted in this book is to challenge my own doxa (a very useful term which comes from anthropology and means “common knowledge” or “that which goes without saying”), specifically in the assumptions and presuppositions I have concerning sexuality.

In high school I studied French. In college, I majored in English with a French minor. During my college years, I spent a lot of time scouring through translations of French poetry starting with Baudelaire, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Valéry, and Apollinaire. Later, I discovered poets like Lorca, Neruda, Pessoa, Alexandre, Milosz, Ekelof, Akhmatova, and Popa. I sensed that these poets were more interesting than most contemporary American poets. I got hooked on translations. I still am. From French, I translated two American Symbolists, Stuart Merrill and Francis Vielé-Griffin, and later I translated some of Joyce Mansour. In 2003, I began translating from Persian with my friend Mahmood Karimi-Hakak. I had studied Persian for two years in graduate school, and I was very interested in Sufism. Mahmood and I have translated a book of Hafez, *Your Lover's Beloved: 51 Ghazals by Hafez* (2009), and then we completed the first full-length translation of Iraj Mirza, *Love Me More Than the Others: Selected Poems of Iraj Mirza* (2014). Iraj Mirza is an Iranian poet of the early twentieth century whose poetry is banned in Iran because of his progressive beliefs and his shocking use of sexuality. In addition, I have worked with my wife Maria Bennett to translate the first selected poetry of the Italian poet Annelisa Addolorato. Translation pushes you to the limits of language. It is the art of the approximate. You have to find language for ideas, idioms, and syntax that are simply alien to English. In that way, translating poetry is both frustrating and refreshing. Writing my own poetry is another matter. Poetry is the art of the specific. It demands the transformation and distillation of experiences and feelings into concrete images, symbols, and figurative language. At its best, poetry is a moan just beyond delirium.

I was very fortunate to be awarded two Fulbright-Hays fellowships to India. These were essentially travel grants which allowed me to see many of India's major cities such as New Delhi, Agra, Mumbai, Chennai, Calcutta, Bangalore, Khajuraho,

Varanasi, Bodhgaya, Jaipur, and Aurangabad. At that time I was teaching Non-Western World Literature, so I read a great deal about India's religious diversity. Later, in 2011, I was invited as a featured poet to the Kritya poetry festival in Nagpur, and recently I was invited to the 2013 Hyderabad Literary Festival. I had heard many delightful stories from Charles Henri Ford and Ira Cohen about Kathmandu, Nepal, so that was one of the first countries I visited after India. Then after studying Buddhism for about ten years with Robert Thurman at Columbia, I visited Tibet. I flew into Lhasa, and came out overland in a bus over the Himalayas into Nepal. I was also awarded a travel grant to China and Japan. To prepare for my Japanese visit, I decided to try writing some haiku. Out of these experiments came three chapbooks of haiku with collages by John Digby entitled *The Strength of the Spider's Web Decides*, *When Dreaming Birds Sing*, and *Perfume in a Sandstorm* as well as *Whatever Nakedness Allows*, a book of erotic haiku with erotic drawings by Cheryl De Ciantis. In 2007, I was selected to participate in a Friendship Delegation to Iran sponsored by the Fellowship Of Reconciliation, America's largest and oldest interfaith peace and justice organization. While in Iran, we visited Tehran, Qum, Esfehan, and Shiraz. Perhaps one of my most memorable moments of international travel happened when I visited the tomb of Hafez in Shiraz.

Today, I'm not that pessimistic about poetry at all. Bookmaking, it seems, is a dying art and will be replaced by other electronic media, just as magazines now compete with ezines. Poetry, however, is different. It celebrates, praises, protests, complains, grieves, and describes real human emotions. I believe people who have been weaned on sound bites and computer games are beginning to search for meaning in something deeper, something more complex, more visionary, and I believe people will always be drawn to those forms of expression that are insightful, discerning, and perceptive in whatever media they are available. New writers will find their way to poetry just as I did, searching for ways to express their experiences, emotions, and

adventures. Poetry is a gift that articulates subtle states of awareness for which no other language exists. Readers, I believe, are drawn to and are seeking something more profound than advertising slogans and throw-away rhymes.

It seems to me that poetry is more relevant in America than it has ever been. Social media represents communication in a brief, trite, topical manner. But people yearn for something deeper, something that reveals meaning instead of dismissing it. My students are astonished to discover the depth, diversity, and density that poetry offers. Like its sister-art, the popular song, poetry offers those who read it or hear it a personal vindication of their own experiences. Poetry allows those who write it an opportunity to mine their most intimate and meaningful experiences for language that can be shared with others. Also, poetry has exploded on the internet with websites, e-books, blogs, e-zines, and Youtube.

Bill Wolak is a poet, photographer, and collage artist, who lives in New Jersey and has just published his fifteenth book of poetry entitled *The Nakedness Defense* with Ekstasis Editions. His poetry has appeared in over a hundred magazines. His most recent translation with Mahmood Karimi-Hakak, *Love Me More Than the Others: Selected Poetry of Iraj Mirza*, was published by Cross-Cultural Communications in 2014. His translations have appeared in such magazines as *The Sufi Journal*, *Basalt*, *Visions International*, *World Poetry Journal*, and *Atlanta Review*. His critical work and interviews have appeared in *Notre Dame Review*, *Persian Heritage Magazine*, *Gargoyle*, *Southern Humanities Review*, and *Prime Numbers Magazine*.

Mr. Wolak has been awarded several National Endowment for the Humanities scholarships and two Fulbright-Hays scholarships to study and travel in India. In 2007, he was selected to participate in a Friendship Delegation to Iran sponsored by the Fellowship of Reconciliation, America's largest and oldest interfaith peace and justice organization. During the Summer of 2010, Mr. Wolak was awarded a Field Study Opportunity in China and Japan by the National Consortium for Teaching about Asia. He was selected to be a featured poet at festivals in India five times: at the 2011 Kritya International Poetry Festival in Nagpur, at the 2013 Hyderabad Literary Festival, at the Tarjuma 2013: Festival of Translators

in Ahmedabad, at the 2014 Hyderabad Literary Festival, and at the 2017 Goa Arts and Literary Festival.

Recently, he was a featured poet at The Mihai Eminescu International Poetry Festival in Craiova, Romania; *Europa in versi*, Lake Como, Italy; The Pesaro International Poetry Festival, Pesaro, Italy; The Xichang-Qionghai Silk Road International Poetry Week, Xichang, China; The Ethnofest, Pristina, Kosovo; the Chengdu International Poetry Week, Chengdu, China; and the International Poetic Conference, Poznan, Poland.