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Janus-Faced Optimism: America's Inaugural Poetry

America's inaugural poetry offers a Janus-faced American optimism, looking with deep rue at the complex and violent human past to imagine an always better, equal, and more peaceful future. American poet Robert Pinsky in the title essay in *Poetry and the World* notes that poets beginning in the British tradition have tackled a constant duality: the rough-and-tumble world compared to often isolated feelings of personal or spiritual integrity. We can find this theme, for instance, at the center of Emily Dickinson's poetry ("Much madness is divinest sense / To a discerning eye"). America's inaugural poets however base their Janus-faced optimism in the world-embracing current of Walt Whitman. Whitman as a poet embraced the unity of all things, and for instance said in "Song of Myself" that he would not abase the body to the soul, nor the soul to the body.

With less equanimity than Whitman concerning the violence and tragedy, America's inaugural poets from 1960 to 2009 like Whitman call for Americans to fulfill the principals of *The Declaration of Independence*: equality, and life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for all. These founding, complex and even ambiguous principals in *The Declaration of Independence* and poetry of Walt Whitman, the other founding father, broadly affect American literature. We see it in America's inaugural verse, in the only four inaugural poets to read since the first inauguration of President George Washington in 1789 to the inauguration of the first African-American President Barack Obama in 2009—namely poets Robert Frost, Maya Angelou, Miller Williams, and Elizabeth Alexander.

Equality's underlining aspiration—or question—is an abiding American sphinx.

The Declaration of Independence has impacted American poetry. Its equality principal can be heard in Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself," where "every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you." It rings more bitterly in the disappointment of Langston Hughes' question "What happens to a dream deferred?" Students encounter it every year in Robert Frost's well-anthologized "The Mending Wall," as a farmer considers whether "good fences make good neighbors." Equality's underlining aspiration—or question—is an abiding American sphinx. Each generation must ask as well as answer it for themselves. And so Frost in "The Black Cottage" calls equality "that hard mystery of Jefferson's." In 2010, visions of equality lie at the core of health care, poverty, business conduct, the treatment of prisoners, and many other debates.

When Elizabeth Alexander was announced as the 2009 inaugural poet, some commentators questioned whether poetry had a place in governmental functions. While official occasions can elicit boring art, that is a small risk considering that a public sphere devoid of the arts is devoid of the highest intricacies of human expression. In the U.K. in fact, the Poet Laureate serves for a number of years and is invited by various British institutions to provide verse for occasions and endeavors. Robert Frost, America's first inaugural poet, felt similarly when he wrote in his 1960 inaugural poem "Dedication" for President John F. Kennedy:

> Summoning artists to participate
> In the august occasions of the state
> Seems something artists ought to celebrate.

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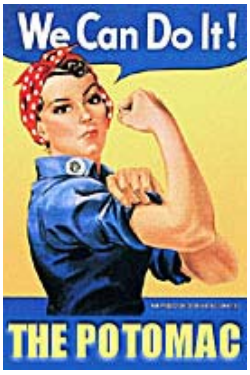

Frost's opening argument accepts the inaugural invitation as a public challenge to be met. He disagrees with 20th century artistic and cultural visions of dystopia:

> Some poor fool has been saying in his heart
> Glory is out of date in life and art.

Rather, Frost writes that J.F.K.'s inauguration may "presage / The glory of a next Augustan age." Here, Frost compares America to Rome. By doing so, "Dedication" celebrates America's cultural refinement and imperial power. It envisions America embracing a leading role on the world-historical stage, as well as an ideal future with more freedom for all. However this ideal is cognizant the messier parts of human history and experience when Frost writes about "revolution and outlawry":

> Our venture in revolution and outlawry
> Has justified itself in freedom's story
> Right down to now in glory upon glory.

For sheer poetic delight, over the years I have enjoyed how this poem expresses its enthusiasm:

> There is a call to life a little sterner,
> And braver for the earner, learner, yearner.

Robert Frost said that he hoped to lodge a few poems in a place they could not be easily got rid of. True to those words, he was able to lodge—not one—but two inaugural poems into the public record on that cold, January inauguration day. Because of the bitter wind at the lectern, the 87-year-old poet could not read the new "Dedication." Instead from memory he recited the more famous and accomplished poem, "The Gift Outright." "The Gift Outright" opens with maybe the best opening of any inaugural poem—capturing that sense of America as unfolding project, a theme that runs through Whitman (life as process) and through the inaugural poems thereafter—

> The land was ours before we were the land's.

Here possessors ("ours") are changed by their act of possession. Therefore, at the line's end the land has possessive power over its people in the word: "land's." This historical reversal is mirrored in the poetic line's chiasmus: "land / ours" and then "we / land's." Also, the opening phrase "[t]he land was ours" uses a linking be verb, followed by a subject-compliment adjective, to indicate human possession. This linking verb emphasizes the static nature of ownership compared to an active verb construction, such as 'We owned the land.' The linking verb subtly displays doubt about ownership's grasp. In the end, we become "the land's." America's story begins in European exile and property possession in this poem (which does not address native American history). This historical possession was not idealistic, and Frost writes: "(The deed of gift was many deeds of war)." Nevertheless, after "[p]ossessing what we still were unpossessed by," Americans became "[p]ossessed by what we now more possessed." One can also see this transformation as a metaphor for *The Declaration of Independence*, written in a historical era of routine slavery and servitude, the language and concepts of freedom and equality better envision and fit our imperfect social life today.

Angelou uses her moment to rally the better angels of her listeners and the nation to principals of equality, liberty from tyranny, and freedom for all...

Maya Angelou's inaugural poem "On the Pulse of the Morning" echoes Frost's first line from "The Gift Outright" by imagining this "land" in America's landscape in its pre-human, Paleolithic days. Angelou turns the clock even farther. The land was neither "ours" nor we of the land. Her poem opens:

> A Rock, A River, A Tree
> Hosts to species long since departed,
> Marked the mastodon.

Like Frost noting that early Americans possessed, but were not yet possessed by the land—and so hinting that the land itself possessed its own existence and shaping force—

Angelou's poem has the land begin to speak. It speaks to chastise American's warring spirit.

> But today, the Rock cries out to us, clearly, forcefully . . .
>
> Your mouths spilling words
> Armed for slaughter.
>
> The Rock cries out today, you may stand on me,
> But do not hide your face.

Angelou's poem in spirit, rather than style, echoes the British Romantic concern that humanity's alienation from nature has disfigured us. Here, nature is beckoning us back. It is saying: "you may stand on me." However, the land qualifies this invitation to only in truthfulness. "But do not hide your face," says Angelou's earth.
The land invites Americans to practice peace. Maya Angelou writes.

> Across the wall of the world,
> A River sings a beautiful song,
> Come rest here by my side. . . .
>
> Your armed struggles for profit
> Have left collars of waste upon
> My shore, currents of debris upon my breast.
>
> Yet, today I call you to my riverside,
> If you will study war no more. Come. . . .

Toward the end of this poem, Angelou assumes a Janus-faced optimism. The poem uses this perspective of peace versus war to look back at American history, and imagine a better future.

> History, despite its wrenching pain,
> Cannot be unlived, and if faced
> With courage, need not be lived again.
>
> Give birth again
> To the dream.

To this day, I can recall hearing Angelou's poem on the radio during the 1992 inauguration of President Clinton. I still can hear the feeling of stern optimism the poem imparted, and cannot recall an iota of what the president said. Reading the 36-strophe poem for this essay, it could benefit from more economy. For poetry, the page demands concision, even from close personal friends. Nevertheless, Angelou uses her moment to rally the better angels of her listeners and the nation to principals of equality, liberty from tyranny, and freedom for all, to "Give birth again / To the dream."

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In 1996, Arkansas formalist poet Miller Williams became the third-ever inaugural poet. Williams roots his poem "Of History and Hope" directly in Angelou's and Frost's sense of history's Janus-face. We can see it in the hesitation in the fifth line of his poem when he says of liking history, "[m]ostly we do."

> We have memorized America,
> how it was born and who have been and where.
> In ceremonies and silence we say the words,
> telling stories, singing the old songs.
> We like the places they take us. Mostly we do.

The poem opens, like Robert Frost's "Dedication," with self-consciousness about how Miller Williams is memorializing the occasion with an inaugural poem. Likewise, history's "telling stories, singing the old songs" serve the same function. Here, Williams has some misgivings, and writes: "We like the places they take us. Mostly we do." Later, the poem notes: "History, despite its wrenching pain" looks forward with a "dream."

Williams' style here is to meld colloquial speech ("we say the words") with a loose iambic

pentameter (four beats in the first line, five beats thereafter). Also in terms of meter, lines two and four start with trochees (with the hard beat coming first), which create rhythmic diversity. These hard beats also emphasize the "how" (methods and selective choices) and "telling" (narrative) of history tales. The words, backed by beats, emphasize the activity in memorializing the past. Glancing at the past, Williams then looks toward the future:

But where are we going to be, and why, and who?

Considering the 21st century will bring America further demographic, technological, and even climate changes, who can know? If we actively are "telling" the past, can we presume that we actively script the future? Williams, like the inaugural poets before him, ties this Janus-faced question toward the future. He offers an open-ended sense of ideals:

> **We mean to be the people we meant to be,**
> **to keep on going where we meant to go.**

Williams could have ended the poem here or closely thereafter. If he had, he may have created a twelve-line classic: concise, philosophical, poignant, sphinx-like in its teasing of the reader to imagine, through the poem, the struggles of our collective past and future. However them poem, with repetition-creating sentimentality, and with a maudlin rhyme, continues:

> The children. The children. How does our garden grow?
> With waving hands—oh, rarely in a row—

The poem later places hope in the next generation. In contrast, Frost and Angelou in their inaugural poems clearly address their peers.

One strength of Alexander's writing is its unique phrasing. This torqued phrasing highlights objects in their human significance. It does this by highlighting the activity involved in an object, rather than the object as a stillness apart.

Elizabeth Alexander's 2009 inaugural "Praise Song for the Day" also takes up this theme of children. Alexander's first six tercet stanzas fly over people in their ordinary tasks as if with a wide-lens camera. Her lens captures people "stitching up a hem, darning / a hole in a uniform, patching a tire." In stanza seven, the gaze turns to "dirt roads and highways." The poem notes that these crossing "mark / the will of some one." This can be read broadly into history: history as will. Society is shaped by conflict as well as agreements, hints the poem, and America displays all these willful "mark(s)."

Therefore in the poem's opening when Alexander writes, "Each day we go about our business," her poem read a second or third time presents a casual, yet deeply practical view of people tending their affairs in a heterogeneous, complex, and sometimes violent world. The poem's opening continues: People walk "past each other, catching each other's / eyes or not, about to speak or speaking." For better or worse, that is an apt description of the public space in late 20th century and early 21st century America, shaped by a credo of individualism, the isolating effects of portable technologies like music and phone devices, and a waning of the communal spirit of The New Deal and 1960s eras. In the first decade of the 21st century in America featuring two wars, dubious elections, and shocking mistreatment of prisoners of war that certainly question this country's commitment to equality, the poem opens: "Each day we go about our business."

With this sense of contemporary endurance in a landscape resonate with history's "mark[s]"—and combined with an implied optimism derived very likely from the occasion of the 2009 inauguration of America's first African-American / half-Caucasian president—the poem continues:

> We cross dirt roads and highways that mark
> the will of someone and then others, who said
> I need to see what's on the other side.
>
> I know there's something better down the road.
> We need to find a place where we are safe.

We walk into that which we cannot yet see.

Say it plain: that many have died for this day.
Sing the names of the dead who brought us here,
who laid the train tracks, raised the bridges,

picked the cotton and the lettuce, built
brick by brick the glittering edifices
they would keep clean and work inside of.

One strength of Alexander's writing is its unique phrasing. This torqued phrasing highlights objects in their human significance. It does this by highlighting the activity involved in an object, rather than the object as a stillness apart. For instance, the poem notes: "edifices / they would keep clean and work inside of." That "work inside of" has an awkward beauty. This awkward beauty visually depicts and sonically captures the cleaning people's tough, repetitive, necessary and honest work. This fact-as-process, this object-as-actively-experienced echoes the theme of America-as-process theme that runs through Robert Frost's "The Gift Outright," through Maya Angelou's "dream" at the end of her inaugural poem, back to Whitman's vision as life as process, and the whole process of politics and ideals that *The Declaration of Independence* articulated and helped tip into motion. Process, rather than object, is a significant American theme.

Alexander's poetic language in "Praise Song for the Day" employs a plain-speaking style. It is most interesting when she captures in language a view of life and society as the product of human activity.

The opening of "Praise Song"—"Each day we go about our business"—cuts against inaugural aspirations. However, the poem also is cognizant of ancestors and others who sacrificed in order to make today a better social place:

Say it plain: that many have died for this day.
Sing the names of the dead who brought us here,

The poem, like Miller Williams' "Of History and Hope," looks to the next generation for its optimism when "[a] teacher says, Take out your pencils. Begin." However, most of this poem's optimism is placed in people's endurance to navigate social and political landscapes to "go about our business"; to work hard and undertake "the figuring-it-out at the kitchen table"; and to bring joy to daily life:

Someone is trying to make music somewhere,
with a pair of wooden spoons on an oil drum,
with cello, boom box, harmonica, voice.

Alexander's poetic language in "Praise Song for the Day" employs a plain-speaking style. It is most interesting when she captures in language a view of life and society as the product of human activity. Her phrasing is inventive when it highlight this:

the figuring-it-out at the kitchen table.

Watching the 2009 inauguration through the Internet, I can remember hearing her poem very well. The most interesting moment for me came right after the phrase above, as the poem abruptly shifts in focus, mimicking a sudden leap in thought. The poem offers:

What if the mightiest word is love?

Spoken in the middle of Washington D.C. among all the assembled politicians, the suggestion was courageous, simple, and refreshing. It rings with idealism, calling those listening or reading to embrace a historically knowledgeable, Janus-faced optimism to shape society for the better. In fact, love as a principal for organizing society is more embracing, more demanding of all than mere legal equality. It harkens back to the ending of Maya Angelou's inaugural poem. There toward the end "on the pulse of the new day," Angelo envisions a simple and sincere universal fellowship. This is stated in the simple, religiously-freighted last line "Good morning." This sentiment is not reflected in the "earner, learner, yearner" ideal of Robert Frost's "Dedication." However, it does root back to Walt Whitman, where in "Song of Myself," Whitman names love as the steering device of creation by using a nautical term: "the kelson of creation is love."

Alexander's poem closes by echoing Martin Luther King's dream of universal fellowship of "all of God's children" envisioned in King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech:

> Love beyond martial, filial, national,
> Love that casts a widening pool of light,
> Love with no need to pre-empt grievance.
>
> In today's sharp sparkle, this winter air,
> Any thing can be made, any sentence begun
> On the brink, on the brim, on the cusp,
> praise song for walking forward in that light.

Gregg Mosson is the author a book of nature poetry, Season of Flowers and Dust (Goose River Press, 2007), and Questions of Fire (Plain View Press, 2009), a book that looks at the social dilemmas around us. His poetry and literary criticism have appeared in The Baltimore Review, The Cincinnati Review, Z Magazine, Loch Raven Review, The Potomac Review, and other journals. He has an MA from the Johns Hopkins Writing Seminars, where he was a teaching fellow and lecturer. He lives with his family in Maryland. For more, seek www.greggmosson.com.

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