Pros in Poetry

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When a poet chooses to make poetry a career, he or she has made a shift in vocation as drastic as that made by a dressmaker who ends up a plumber. For careerism is a vocation in itself, with its own set of skills (like grand-standing, back-rubbing, glad-handing, image-cultivating, homage to the powerful, sexual openness in the right direction, and so forth). Most careerists don’t want it noticed how hard they work to publicize themselves, because naturally that effort reflects on their talent. They want to be known as brilliant poets, not grinding careerists. For public consumption they endorse the common wish-fulfillment fantasy that if you are talented enough (which of course you are) or have that certain something (which of course you do)—and are lucky—one day your fairy godmother talent scout will touch you and you will burst into fame, in spite of natural shyness and crowded incisors. Stars like to promulgate
the how-am-I-to-blame-I-can’t-help-it part of this myth—projecting an aura that they have some indefinable quality, some magnetism, some je-ne-sais-quoi that makes a crowd go mad with adoration, while they sit around innocently buffing their fingernails or shrugging their minks. But it is all myth and fancy. Fame is not forced on you by the media. To maintain their affection you have to keep yourself “hot,” flooding the airwaves around you with news of your own importance, all day and all night, hitting the public above its belt of perception and below it. (Of course a little talent may help—the way a little truth lends credence to a lie.)

Unlike carpentry, you can’t live off poetry without a large audience and big name, or you won’t get good advances against royalties, frequent honoraria for readings, and quick and generous grants. So if you’re determined to eat off your poems, you have opted to pursue a career—money, power, fame, and admirers.

You see reporters as good fairies—trying to be helpful. You modestly resolve to supply the American people with the folk hero they need. You paint a poetic image of yourself for any interested party.

Careerism diverts the attention of poets from getting their dreams into words, to getting their names into print. Then, it encourages them to publish, whether they have anything new to say or not, to keep solvent and in the public’s eye. In other words, it dilutes their work. (Compare *Naked Lunch*, with ten years of suffering and soaring compressed in it, with any of the author’s subsequent books. You cannot remind a published poet too often, that the most loving gift he or she can make, to letters and to living and future readers, is to be silent once the message is out.) Careerism leads poets to abandon their small local audiences for fatter quarry—their salt of the earth for agents and managers.
Before naming the two or three names I’m going to name, it might be fitting for me to beg their bearers for forgiveness, as a Native American might pray to the deer he is about to shoot. But I am not aiming at deer nor people but images made of paper, ink, plastic, and light, which are then inflicted upon, and enter the minds of, millions of people. It may be asked why I am picking on relatively “good” images, and not more obviously pernicious ones. It is the particular purpose of this essay to show that all media images are “bad,” and what better tactic is there than to use the “best” ones as examples?

Allen Ginsberg is the limiting case of a poet who has achieved “name, fame, and shame of money” by genius of personality promotion, public relations, and celebrity pursuit. To give credit where it’s due, if there is such a thing as a poet of publicity (like poets of military strategy or of high finance) then Allen is it.

His knack for attracting, not to say controlling, reporters, writers, and photographers, ranks with that of Lindbergh or Zsa Zsa Gabor. Luckily for us, he is a generous and compassionate man, and has seen fit to share his spotlight with good causes and interesting upbeat friends. But anyway, there is this whole field of poets trying to cash in on their poetry and use it as a stepping-stone to fine careers and foundation grants, to the detriment of their work. As if the selling-out were not enough, the figures they cut are grotesque. Allen carries his egomania into the media with such comic sense and aesthetic control, that it often comes out a kind of wonderful joke, like the routines of Harpo or Chaplin (stars from a time when the media seemed innocent and positive, offering rather than depriving—like a six Coupé with rumble seat). But what Allen plays as a ham or buffoon, his imitators play as laureates with
lyres. What he plays as slapstick, they play as opera. It is ludicrous to be caught scrambling to make it, with all your vanity, ambitiousness, and greed for attention showing, but fatally so when you’ve chosen to play noble savage or deathless Apollo.

There are poets about as old as Allen Ginsberg, peers with him in philosophic outlook, and of higher repute in some poetic circles, who are “unknown” and can scarcely get their books into print. They do not foster cults of personality, of their own or others, as if they belonged to the Order of Mutual Embalmers. They are either indifferent to fame or unwilling to sell themselves or unskilled as to how. Or perhaps they think of themselves as simple workmen, or as mere thumbpicks of the Muse’s lyre—far too lowly to prop up Her glorious work, as if it were crippled, with readings, radio appearances, elongated biographical notices, and tedious introductions.

Gary Snyder was canonized as a macho woodsy Bodhisattva in a Kerouac novel and then became cult poet of the ecology movement. Like Allen Ginsberg, he has (it seems) never turned down a reporter, and has allowed himself, without protest, to be defined as patron saint and initiator of the hippie lifestyle. The image is a man of energy and action. But it is a crafted image, as all such popular images are—funny in the case of Liberace but serious in the case of a man who tries to be a spokesperson for our ideals. (For example, where was he, or even his image, when the Peripheral Canal was being pushed?) At the Human Be-in, he, Allen, Mike McClure, and Timothy Leary were on stage because they thought they should be there, being star-leader-gurus, not because anyone forced them to be there. Gary is a friend of the Governor because he thinks he should be, because they have something in common—politics—not be-
cause “the governor of the province seeks advice from the humble poet.”

Gary has written essays condemning monoculture but practices the very things that feed monoculture: star-careerism, support of the mass media, long-windedness, and drab prose. Star-careerism, by circulating the poet’s gab and glossies everywhere, over a land big enough to support thousands of local cultures, drowns out our own unique experiences and expressions. As with food, we are brainwashed into thinking that store-bought packaged images are better than anything we could cook up ourselves, out of our own neighborhoods, our own problems, and our own ways of life. Star trips work themselves out through the mass media: paperback books, magazines, newspapers, television, radio, and heavily advertised readings (or other performances). Every time an artist as well-educated as Gary Snyder permits a mass publisher to issue a commonplace edition of his or her work, he or she bears karmic responsibility for further spreading the oil-slick of uncaring, deadening monoculture. Either such artists cannot recognize ugliness in a closely related field (here, it is book design)—in which case they need a sabbatical to widen their horizons—or do recognize it but think their poetry is the cure-all for the acutely ill masses if only it reaches them in time and by any available means no matter how questionable—in which case they need spiritual guidance including ego deflation—or want the money or exposure that ugliness always manages to tempt us with—in which case they need this essay sung to them. Mass media are the guns of monocultural imperialism, which is imposed, like any other kind of imperialism, to make as big a profit as possible for its owners and controllers. Like a virus the purpose of the mass media is to invade and take over, establishing bigger and
bigger markets for themselves and their products. There is a natural community of interest between the poet who wants to saturate the world with his or her images or self and the executives and stockholders of these gigantic diversified corporations who want to saturate the world with Cokes, Camels, and even poetry if it will sell. Every time a poet is long-winded—that is, has made his or her statement and yet continues to make it over and over, instead of exploring some completely new art, field, or topic, or just keeping still—or is boringly academic, or writes down, or presents ideas that are already old hat and in currency, or allows work that is bad, juvenile, or trivial to be printed (for example an old college thesis), or uses learned quotations and social science jargon as props, he or she steals the value from words and brings them down to usual mass media standards (and fells trees for wasted paper). (Nor can this theft be atoned for by after-the-fact generosity, such as donating royalties to a foundation—it didn’t work for John D. Rockefeller, either.) Finally, against a long tradition of careful and often beautiful prose from the pens of poets (Yeats and Eliot come to mind, and Ginsberg can be glorious), Gary plods. It would be nice if someday this reader would notice a book of his—prose or poetry—among a slew of others by its standing-out beauty, and pick it up saying to himself, “Oh boy, now I’m going to be treated to a Japanese lunch of new ideas succinctly stated!”

To turn to the marketplace for a moment. Gary Snyder and Allen Ginsberg will probably never be offered $3.2 million for paperback rights to their world view (as Judith Krantz was), no matter how they may be able to suburbanize it, but they will be offered $3200 and conceivably ten times that much, with the help of a powerhouse agent. The
point is that their relationship to the “counter-cultural” media that have featured and supported them is the same as Jacqueline Susann’s and Judith Krantz’s relationship to their media. There are differences in literary quality, in social consciousness, in life-style—but fundamentally there is one marketplace and one media hype, and Gary’s full-page photo in City Miner doesn’t differ in any fundamental moral detail from Ms. Krantz’s in People.

Poet!

Your very name means creation!
Have you no fairier aspiration
Than to be Ms. Krantz’s poor relation?

There is an idea weaving in and out of modern literary history, that a poet’s work is first and foremost an expression of Self, character, or sensibility. Certainly at times, perhaps at times of great social alienation, or when no social body will listen to what the poet has to say about it, or perhaps for personal psychological reasons, the artist turns inward and away from consensus, stresses the importance of his or her own unique perceptions and expressions, and paints the world in entirely personal hues. Thus we have expressionism and thus we have poetry of Self like Whitman’s.

Whitman dived into ego with addict glee, nor for the whole of his life was his self-absorption ever glutted or relieved. He thought it was as healthy an urge as sex or swimming and plunged into it with the same sense of liberation from unnatural Victorian restraints as he plunged into sex with other men, body
truthfulness, and comradeship with prostitutes and other shunn’d and lowly persons—indeed at times he claimed that Self or Personality was the whole crux of his work. It is subdued and subordinate in his touching letters on the Union wounded, but toward the end of his life, alas, there is little left but egoism, as witness the Traubel journals—documents of great devotion, both to truth and Whitman. In recent times Whitman has seldom been called on it, partly because he was so up-front about it, partly because he expanded ego to include multitudes and causes, making it seem petty or paradoxical to pin an ego-trip on this most all-including poet, partly because he’s dead, can no longer run rampant with it, and anyway is beyond the reach of criticism, and partly because the floodgates of poetic egoism have been stuck open so long, that in retrospect Whitman is but a face in the crowd. But vices of a poet are transmitted more readily than virtues, and Whitman has had a stupefying effect on later poets. Because Whitman had so many portraits painted and photographed and worried endlessly about which one to use as a frontispiece or which one most accurately brought out this or that aspect of his character, Mike McClure, for example, feels free to paper the literary world with so many glossies you would think he had no time to lay down his powderpuffs to pick up a pen. Because Whitman celebrated Self in poems, Allen Ginsberg, for example, feels free to celebrate Self in poems, radio, television, movies, magazines, and on every stage possible. It is not so much the compassionate need to enlighten that drives Allen into the media, but the furious sense of Self that long ago burst out of poetry into readings and splashed into newspapers.

By “harmless” celebration of Self Whitman bumsteered a lineage of poets into indulging already rampant and ugly self-habits,
magnified by electronic technology unknown in his day—just as, by “harmless” celebration of nationhood and industrialization Whitman bumsteered a lineage of idealistic young persons into endorsing rampant Growth and Expansion, with inevitable consequence of war, empire greed, corporate profiteering, blissful over-consumption, environmental degradation, gene-pool depletion, and the creation of huge standardized markets which is monoculture. The big redwoods are gone. The grizzly bears gone. The hirsute and strong-breasted buffaloes gone. Instead of varied carols, Muzak. Instead of artisanship, assembly lines. Instead of tinkers, garbage collectors. Instead of moonlit orchard, arc-lit asphalt. Instead of sylvan huts with doorway vine, project housing with spray-can graffiti—and the graffiti are boring. Before you start to ask if Whitman would have been embarrassed by smog, urban redevelopment, atom bombs, and PCB, you suddenly remember that in his time the factories he sang about were already destroying the beautifully named rivers and places he liked to tabulate. In his time the Indians (who named the rivers and places he liked to tabulate) were being slaughtered like buffalo by the pioneers he adored. In his time the fate of the redwoods was already sealed (he has these unfortunate titans dying gladly, for “a superber race, they too to grandly fill their time,” etc. ad nauseam). In his time wealth and greed of it ruled just as imperiously as they do today. A century has but given pedigrees and diplomas to the same set of evils, which any poet then was free to see who had the loft to. (Look—up—at Thoreau.) With all Whitman’s power and friendliness, with all his titanic embraciveness, with all his non-conformity, there is a thinness in his heart—a flabby chauvinism, a shirking valor. He has come down to us a brave and
human-loving poet, like Kipling and Riefenstahl—so long as we don’t peek at his premises or see through his rhetoric.

America is not a nation but a marketing concept invented by ambitious merchandisers like General Mills, General Foods, General Motors, General Electric, General Dynamics, and Colonel Sanders; by the Nationals, Standards, Universals, Amalgamateds, Associateds, and Uniteds; by cattle, railroad, oil, and agribusiness executives and corresponding union capos; by political bosses and lonely poets—poets so nervous and lonely they can never sit still and be content with hearth, craft, a lover, a family, tribe, or community, but must wander restless and promiscuous toward greener towns and better climates, keeping their hearts aloof and virginal, as if for some Ms. or Mr. Right—loving multitudes but not men and women, strangers but not friends, forests but not trees, a whole nation impressionistically but not a neighborhood dearly. In Whitman’s time John Humphrey Noyes was not patriotically afire about a War between States—a venal war, as most wars are—but was busily establishing a subtle heaven on earth with the men and women of his large created family. There is nothing like a “national” movement, war, or crisis—and the farther from humdrum concerns the better—to give lonely throbbing intellectuals, remote and unhappy, something to live and die for. In some sense Whitman was an early casualty of the industrial age—he was self-absorbed and alienated yet lucky enough to live at a time when vast panoramas of virgin natural beauty still existed. His blindness and indulgences, epidemic today, can’t be disregarded. Today we can smile at Gunga Din, for the sun sets every night on the Union Jack, but it is hard to abide the “Song of Myself,” mirrored by every other young poet around us.
Poets are not clairvoyant seers or shamans, oracles or prophets,† except perhaps in their own say-so. Let us be hard-headed about it. They are very sensitive individuals with a low tolerance to boredom in social and aesthetic matters. They are among the first to sense what is wrong with the status quo and how to change it. Often they do not know what is wrong, in any intellectual sense, but

†Nor are they bards, wandering minstrels, or minnesingers. It would be wonderful if they were, such that a fan would prefer to buy a tape of their work rather than a book of it, but they are not and oughtn't to pretend to be. Modern poetry is an art-form written to be read silently (with the obvious exceptions of poems set to music or read by poet-performers born or practiced). Many poets have unpleasant voices, no stage presence or sense of drama, and are not expected to know their poems by heart (their recitations being called “readings” for that reason). Many reading poets have eccentric, flirting, or unusual mannerisms or methods of delivery, which may be fetching or interesting in themselves, but have nothing to do with their poems per se. They “accompany” their poems the way the music of a popular song may accompany banal lyrics. If you are perusing an anthology of poems, you can skip the poems that bore you, but if you are at a poetry reading, with a mild interest in a poet appearing later in the program, express their complaints and paint their utopias anyway, poetry being a medium that doesn’t require whys and therefore.

When a culture has become ossified and has turned into a prison for the true and lovely—which is the very life force itself, growing and changing as it does perforce, even when locked behind bars of hollow and outdated norms—a lot of people go loco from the you must sit through what seems like hours of torture, or give up and go home. This being so, why in the world do people still continue to attend readings, and why are they still given? I have thought about it for a long time without coming to any firm conclusion. Poetry readings may be to poets what gallery openings are to painters: a chance for fan-flesh to see art-flesh and for art-flesh to swell up with what awe, adulation, and fornication may be offered. Readings may make poets feel like prima donnas or provide an audience with contact and entertainment, but steal from poetry its poetry.

Poetry reading was a survival skill of the late fifties, plied by “coffee-house poets,” so called because they read “poetry” to tourists, for donations in the hat, in Greenwich Village coffee-houses, which by then, or shortly thereafter, had become Gray Line stops. Then the trade was taken over by aggressive poseurs, and among poets the term “coffee house poet” came to be a sort of ultimate put-down.
battle raging in their own minds between loveliness breaking out and surly wardens slamming down. Some people become “criminals.” And some join battle with poems, where the new beauty is projected free and true, struggling against decadent values. Professional poets are drawn into the fight almost without thinking—the war penetrates the poetry they would still write anyway, like fumes. But there are other men and women, desperately trapped into an outmoded way of life, for whom poetry is the only escape, the only window, the only vista of freedom. For them it is not a way of life but an act of desperation. They may trip and scramble up the words a bit but crash through anyway. And if their work lacks polish it is fierce and true—because necessary. I assure you they do not sit out in the garden among the daffodils, waiting with bated notebook for a visit from Thalia. They do not jot down all the flotsam in their minds on a jet above Kansas, hoping that something genuine will click. They have no reputations to maintain, no identities to confirm, no vocations to practice. The poetry that they undertake to write is never an end in itself—always a last resort—and when an easier, simpler, or more direct way of changing the world to their comfort opens up to them, they take it, and their brief term as poet is over.

The contrast between the two kinds of poet is never higher than at that magical point in a social revolution, when rhetoric turns into action, and people start doing what the poets have been saying. Now the golden period of poetry is over. Poetry has laid the groundwork and softened the enemy’s defense, and soon a few brave souls, clutching thin books, assault the conservative barricades. Where are the professional poets who wrote those books? At home in their slacks and zoris, dickering over
plane fares or polishing their ninety-ninth Revolutionary Idyll. They may feel it is not necessary for their lives to be revolutionary, so long as their poetry has been. But what it has been it no longer is. One by one its old-line admirers give way to wide-eyed college students. It no longer inspires; it is not even relevant—not because of any defect in it—it is the same old poetry as before—but because action pre-empts words, doers pre-empt talkers, and things are moving faster than the speed that even relevant poems could surpass. What else, alas, can these poor shopworn poets do, but pretend the revolution has never stopped beginning, and quixote-like carry their poetry wrapped in its flag to wherever they can find a new audience—to campuses (where they often end up teaching), to popular magazines, and even to government agencies. As the substance of their work evaporates, leaving behind hollow memorabilia, the careers of these “revolutionary poets” commence.

But there are no careers for poets-of-action, and frequently no more poems. To them it is a betrayal of language, of poetry itself, to say what you are not willing to back up with your own deeds in person, at the first chance you get. In their view the world is filled with big talkers—with “socialists” who practice capitalism, with “ecologists” whose autos guzzle leaded gas and whose cigarettes further pollute the smoggy air their friends and families have to breathe, and with “revolutionary poets” who are far more interested in scoring lunch with the Governor than in either revolution or poetry. Poets-of-action show faith in poetry by leaving it, when called to higher duty, but never exploiting or diluting it—and likewise they leave one form of action for a fitter form (or even for writing once again if required) as brusquely and
respectfully. They are driven by necessity from job to job, unattached to any. And yet they hold poetry in special honor, seeing it as a model or metaphor of the way the whole world really works, and they use their poet’s imagination freely to sense the good taste and harmony underlying every aspect of the world they work in, lake, snake, and berry. It is a paradox not to be ignored, that the poets who hold union cards, often end up like high priests selling out the Ark in their charge, while poets-of-action, the non-professionals, blow the definition of poetry out into the ether, giving that art again its capital P.

I can hear a chorus of young poets from Wichita and Milwaukee, Walnut Creek and Grand Rapids, Wilkes-Barre and Sioux Falls, point out, by way of defending mass culture, that if they had not chanced upon a copy of Howl, Bomb, or Lami in their town’s main bookstore, or if they had not walked smack into a poetry reading—by an out-of-town poet—on the steps of the state college library, they might still be assembling carburetors today . . . as I can see an oil-besmirched bird washer, holding a poor, bedraggled shrike, look up and softly, chidingly remind me that if it wasn’t for Kitsch Ecology News, which her roommate subscribes to, she wouldn’t be cleaning here today.

My answer is, centrist organizations and their noisy outputs are what erode local sensibilities everywhere, offering, at most, a few spangles of commercialized awareness for a Shasta of aborted beauty, creating vast cultural deserts whose inhabitants ignore local problems and resources in favor of what’s happening in New York, San Francisco, London, and Paris. And even if one cares about what’s happening in far away cities, mass media are a one-way transmission, from sender to audience. One cannot respond or scat back, except in a
narrow minimal way, as by buying something or tuning in. And the minimal veers into the pathological, as by clapping at a movie or falling in love with a rock star. Once, when Tahara's father was watching "Billy Graham in London," and the preacher called on the saved to come down to the podium, Tahara's father got up in his boxer shorts and stood reverently in front of the television set.

One fights back first by cutting off the noise—by shunning non-local, nation-oriented books, cinema, and television programs—then by watering the flowers of our own local yokelhood, with "home" movies and variety shows, mimeographed newspapers, street theater, old-timer story-telling, hand-set pamphlets and flyers, silk-screen posters, tampered billboards, and other low-cost, low-tech, and low-circulation projects. In a big city "local" may not necessarily mean "neighborhood" but "birds of a feather," who collect at the same mental or spiritual watering-place: poets of a certain persuasion, atheists, gay Latinos, Pure Land Buddhists, Arab grocers, vegans, and so forth. It is better for the people of Wichita and Milwaukee, Walnut Creek and Grand Rapids, to have poetries of their own, though they may be rude and provincial, judged by outside standards, than to have their pretty local muses raped and carried off their feet by big city slickers. And immortality seekers can rest assured that poetry absolutely true to locus—deep and true—will have universal appeal, will provide nourishment to readers from other times and climes. And it won't get lost, or lose its effect, if it isn't listed in Books in Print or Small Press Record.

True, there is a certain amount of opportunism going on, where mediocre poets use minority standing and subject matter (and even ethnic-sounding names) as openings to poetic careers, among their own minorities if hypable, but usually in the "liberal" poetic
marketplaces. They are the poetic-revolutionary cousins of Uncle Tom. As for inspired poets writing for an oppressed minority to which we don’t belong, we ought never to hear of them until, as they mature, the renown of their wisdom and beauty may drift across cultural boundaries.

And I can hear the worried young poets ask if they are going to be stuck for life in the Balkanized utopias I am preaching, without passports, foreign trade, or exchange programs. Of course not. Cultural exogamy is a wonderful stimulant, if taken voluntarily, as much as we may need to enrich our imaginations. Naturally it must not be imposed: we choose what and how much of it we want. As they say, travelling broadens, and an out-of-town or country guest at supper is like first tasting lovage or cilantro. Some poets will emigrate to new locales, bearing spices of their old natal cultures. And some will spread their gospel of new beauty as far as they can travel, and there’s nothing wrong with that as long as they do it missionary-style—in person, like Bodhidharma. A New York book would reach a clan of Wichita poets by going not from publisher to distributor to bookstore to customer, but from publishing friend through author to out-of-town poet, who shows it to his or her friends, who may ask for copies from the author or publisher or reprint it themselves. (Writers can print their own books, can print them with their own hands, and can hand them out too.) Everything stays small and real, without marketing on the part of the publisher or career-forging on the part of the author. To some extent small presses and little magazines already operate this way, often alas through lack of promotional budgets rather than lack of corrupting ambitions. Poets in America and other overdeveloped countries generally start off...
right, of necessity. But then they may veer down the coated-stock road, dropping not only innocence but credibility. To stay poet, one must opt, in a sense, to go underground—to turn one’s back on the gloss, media, and rewards that overdevelopment provides. The comfortable territory that some so-called poets pretend to occupy just doesn’t exist. Either one issues *samizdat* or is Rod McKuen.

We have become format-conscious—conscious of the messages a poet and his or her agents, managers, and publishers send along with the poetry—conscious of the envelope as well as of the letter. We can no longer stand to see the beauty of a poem reversed or hidden from view by an ugly overlay of greed or ambitiousness, whether in a dust jacket or an interview in *Rolling Stone* magazine. We want the physical book including its distribution, and whatever we may hear of or from the poet to be poetry too—rare, simple in means, breathtaking.