On poetic criticism.

One knows ahead of time how the machine will grind.

—Robert Lowell, on interpretation

Fashions in criticism rise like hemlines and fall like stocks, but the burden of criticism remains. The biographical interpretations a century ago, psychological readings a generation back, poststructuralist readings of the day before yesterday—all had their day. Many of the claustrophobia-inducing methods of the moment will soon be old hat, perhaps to be replaced by methods even worse. There’s no Whig history of criticism, at least to the cynic, only small successes in a landscape strewn with pitfalls and bear traps.

The critic’s job of work is to drag poems back to the world in which they were made, to restore the lost background of their creation, while knowing that history has sometimes been used to bully poems and their authors. Wordsworth had a child out of wedlock. Coleridge was an opium addict. Ben Jonson killed a man in a duel. Shakespeare may have been in favor of enclosure (or maybe not—the evidence is ambiguous). You don’t have to scratch the great modernists very deeply to find something unhappy in their makeup, whether anti-Semitism or the casual racist slurs of which all were guilty. We cannot blame the past for being the past, for having attitudes that strike us as unfortunate or even horrifying. None has much influence on the poetry—it has effect only when critics decide that all authors should be taken to the pillory, if not the gallows.

Such uses of the past condescend to the poet for failing to anticipate, within the roil of his life, what our advanced age would think, not of his poetry, but of his prejudices. We’re allowed to shake our heads a little at what previous ages

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thought (or more usually failed to think), but we cannot escape the knowledge that the future may look askance at moral failings to which we are blind. Meanwhile, we patronize the past only at the risk of becoming a mob of Mrs. Grundys.

Poetry is written in a world that richly impinges on the words, the images, the culture of the poem. To look at what surrounded the poem’s birth does not suggest that the artist is merely an empty suit, a medium for culture. Authors rarely believe in the death of the author. Ignorance of a poem’s inner history, however, amounts to willful neglect. A poem is a historical artifact, no less an artifact than a Renaissance slipper or a marble fragment of the Acropolis. History interprets the artifact, and on occasion the artifact interprets history.

The critic must reconcile history and poetry. A poem is a product of its time just as much—if the poem’s any good—as a triumph over its time. Many poems are so familiar we have forgotten how to read them. We see the words but we paper over the cracks in our understanding. Criticism should try to see poems from the inside, to get down into the muck of the poem’s invention—and of course into the muck of its language.

Readers of poetry owe the deepest debt to the New Critics, who showed how much the discussion of poetry had ignored of what poems actually said, ambiguously, ambivalently. For nearly a century, those critics have set the standard for the way we talk about poetry. Taken to extremes, New Criticism had vices set among its many virtues, since every scrap of attention given to one part of a poem takes away attention from the rest. Just as there is no perfect critic, there can be no perfect criticism.

The New Critics, unfortunately, often removed the poem from its setting. Poems, in the end, have only their words; we’re unlikely to recover much else about poets long dead. What we can rescue, even from the distant past, is something of the world in which the poems were written, guideposts like wooden stakes marking a road through heavy snow. Such context has long been part of literary history, and even New Criticism was not immune to glimpses of the historical and biographical that buttressed meaning. In the 1950 revision of *Understanding Poetry*, the classic text of New Criticism, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren added sections on biography, history, even intention—courses of meaning beyond verbal assay or diagnosis. In his posthumous collection *Using Biography*, William Empson, the deepest analyst of poetic language, also tried to restore some of the balance missing. I want to argue that facts lying outside the poem are often crucial to its inner working, and that we might look a little deeper when a poem like “The Red Wheelbarrow” is allowed to exist only on its miniature islet of words.

Perhaps too much New Criticism lies between hagiography (every word a saint) and Gnosticism—or hagiography practiced by Gnostics. I’m as eager as those critics to take apart the gummed-up watchworks or faulty transmission to see what’s going on, and to draw with compass and French curve an exploded diagram of a sonnet. There are critics who do this very well; but two
decades ago I began to feel that the old approaches had become perfect within their limitations and perfect because of their limitations. I found myself more interested in the footnotes that litter anthologies, fallen into mouse print at the bottom of the page.

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Poems can absorb a lot of close reading in service of the meaning the author apparently sought. There’s a fine line between trying to detect the undetectable—resurrecting the long-dead arguments about intention—and suggesting what the author could reasonably have known and might reasonably have meant (using backdrop and atmosphere, the practical surroundings that bear). I want to recognize what art criticism always has, that art is embedded in the world from which it is made.

A critic should be aware of the many ways—through etymology, grammar, the whims of private life, stray evidence of drafts and notes, the corruptions of history, and weather reports—that the reader may peer beneath the blank face of the poem. Some may be more useful than others, but all have purpose. Hints and whispers lie at the margins of the poem. The germ of imagination may forever remain unknown, and even known it can tell us only so much. Still, by such knowledge, the knowledge of the rude beginnings, of the autobiographical touch, among other things, some interpretations might at least be eliminated or made less likely.

A poem long settled in anthologies, memorized by many, read by almost everyone, can become so encrusted with criticism it can no longer be seen plain. It lives in its own shadow. Standard criticism has often ignored the practical aspects of the poem—call them material culture, local bearings, or the unseemly logic of argument.

The main problem new readers wrestle with is not so much what the poem is trying to say—though that, that too, offers its difficulties—but what the things said meant in the world for which they were written. This requires, not encyclopedic knowledge (we have knowledge enough now at our fingertips), merely encyclopedic attention, and the curiosity necessary to attention. It helps to know, for example, in Donald Justice’s “Henry James by the Pacific,” how James made his way west. When Emily Dickinson invokes the locomotive in “I like to see it lap the Miles,” it’s relevant to recall that her father promoted the branch railway-line to Amherst and that she traveled by train herself. Such knowledge is not the end-all, but for certain questions of meaning it is the be-all.

I’m all for teasing out the history of a poem, the gravity in which it abided when written. “Skunk Hour” contains secrets that close reading of Robert Lowell’s biography and correspondence reveals—such a case lies at the border of what a reader can be expected to know, probably just to the wrong side. Knowledge of the circumstance is not ipso facto knowledge of the poem. If we discovered a document proving that Shakespeare had once been a soldier, or a scrivener, or a
tutor—or any of the occupations that, as various critics and cranks have argued, may have occupied him before he became a playwright—it would tell us much about the man but little about the plays. The coroner’s report that surfaced only in 1925, recording the circumstances of Marlowe’s death (fight over an inn bill, dagger), illuminates almost nothing in his work. Still, more than five centuries after the publication of Dante’s *Commedia*, Justin Steinberg has shown in *Dante and the Limits of Law* how much the poem benefits from knowledge of medieval jurisprudence. It’s late news—news, indeed, that many who read the poem in its first century might not have needed, because they already knew.

Much criticism focuses on what the poet does subconsciously or unconsciously, yet very few working poets would lay claim to the strange devices and rattletrap artifice some critics discover. In a now infamous example, a critic convinced herself that the name of the ship Berengaria in Willa Cather’s *The Professor’s House* was some “nonsense word,” a cipher whose meaning could be teased out only in a series of increasingly ludicrous anagrams:

Berengaria, ship of women: the {green} {aria}, the {eager} {brain}, the {bearing} and the {bairn}, the {raring} {engine}, the {bargain} {binge}, the {ban} and {bar}, the {garbage}, the {barrage} of {anger}, the {bare} {grin}, the {rage} to {err}, the {rare} {grab} for {being}, the {begin} and {rebegin} {again}.

This bit of Beckettian fireworks might have seemed a scholar’s joke, had she not prefaced it by saying, “*Berengaria*—a very mother-lode of anagrammatic energia.” Unfortunately, *Berengaria* was just the name of a Cunard liner. The lesson on method is that a hammer may be a pretty good hammer, but it makes a lousy drill.

Criticism is the guesswork of meaning. I won’t pretend that all poems can best be analyzed in this historical-biographical-archaeological way—even for the archaeologist, different landscapes require different tools: field-walking or core samples, say. There’s something to be said for competing methods.

In trivia we often find a clue to what the author was after. To take an example distant from poetry, musicologists now argue that the French taxi horns in Gershwin’s *An American in Paris* have been at the wrong pitch for seventy years. Instead of A, B, C, and D, they should be tuned, as they were in an early recording, to A flat, B flat, a higher D, and a lower A. The older notes are more dissonant. From such stray facts, brought again to bear, we learn something about Gershwin’s intentions, harmonics, and . . . and taxi horns. The recent linking of Marvell’s “Bermudas” to specific events in the fraught history of the islands during the English Civil War, on the other hand, has explained many obscure references.

The critic must be careful not to turn an interest in the past into corrosive nostalgia. (Or the poem into some seedy adjunct of a lecture on power and class, as so often in the New Historicism and cultural
The discovery of the Derry, New Hampshire, phone directory for a year Frost lived in his farmhouse brings us little closer to the poet’s world; but to know that he was the only farmer in the neighborhood with a telephone tells us something about the poet—about his income, or his expectations, or his sense of standing. It may have been a gesture to relieve the isolation of his wife. Van Gogh’s mustard-colored bed, portrayed in the various versions of Bedroom in Arles, apparently survived at least through the end of the Second World War. Even if the search is sentimental, finding it might tell us how far his painting transformed the ordinary ruck of his life. To learn, however, that the hare in Turner’s Rain, Steam and Speed could outrun the locomotive is more telling. Something in the painting is released from the amnesia of history. Critics, alas, must be omnivorous, if they are to be critics.

Think of the scrap of a bookseller’s list taken from the spine of a seventeenth-century binding, confirming that there actually was a quarto of Love’s Labour’s Won. Two of Milton’s sonnets change when we know that the former pupil for whom he wrote them was heavily in debt. Or, more simply, considering how often flowers appear in her work, we learn something of her art by recalling that Emily Dickinson kept an orchard and a small greenhouse. The remains of the latter were recently discovered.

Poetry is an atavistic force thrust against modern ignorance. Poems are stained with history, their making embedded in history, and it does them no favors to suppress history or pretend it doesn’t exist. To say that poems are only history, however, cobbled from the time and its transient conventions or prejudices, is an ugly simplification. Poems are a language already penetrated by centuries of use, a language particular to the quirks, happenstance, and defective personality of the poet. Poems are not mirrors, no matter how reflective they seem. They’re black pools—tarns, in Frost’s word. As the reader often senses, something moves within or beneath a poem, the shadow of a great fish, or an invisible hand.

1 This piece is adapted from Dickinson’s Nerves, Frost’s Woods, by William Logan, published by Columbia University Press in May 2018.

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