

“Mr. Unpleasant and Mr. Pleasant,” *The Manhattan Review*, Fall/Winter 2007-08

The Undiscovered Country: Poetry in the Age of Tin by William Logan, NY: Columbia University Press, 2005 (\$29.50)

The Trouble with Poetry by Billy Collins, NY: Random House, 2005 (\$22.95)

We live in an age of prose. As William Logan puts it one of his “Verse Chronicles” collected in his *The Undiscovered Country: Poetry in the Age of Tin*, “...we are a country of prose—we eat prose with our cereal by morn and hear it yakking on television by night. If there’s no space for poetry in our busy lives, well, it all happened a long time ago, and it hurts the head to think the old poetic way.” He is being sardonic but only to a degree. Without going into the wooly arguments about poetry mattering and not mattering, it’s fair to say that prose in the United States has readers and poetry, by and large, doesn’t. It’s also fair to say that a comparison isn’t fair because poetry is intense stuff by its rhythmic, sonic and emotional nature and the prose that comprises the manual for your new personal computer isn’t. How the cloud of prose that poetry lives under has affected poetry is never far—as Logan picks up yet another volume of very free verse—from his mind. It is a cloud that could make a poet-critic querulous. Poetry, after all, came first.

“Poetry” is, however, a very variable word; what one age considers the real stuff, another deems bombastic, dull or merely inconsequential. Logan notes this in a fine essay on Walt Whitman when he cites the worthies favored by the mid-nineteenth century who have fallen into well-deserved oblivion. To read Thomas Wentworth Higginson (once a grandee and now a footnote for his relationship with Emily Dickinson) comparing Whitman unfavorably to Sidney Lanier—“a higher genius”—is a sobering experience. Rightfully, Logan begins his book with Whitman because Whitman remains for all his Americanism largely unwanted by America. Go teach some poems from *Calamus* with their “dear love of comrades” in a typically anxious, test-obsessed, poetry-averse American high school and see how far down the open road you get. He and Dickinson form the perfect pair of disreputable parents—a yawping son of the cosmos and a chafing daughter of Puritanism. The two most esteemed American poets from the nineteenth century needed the twentieth century to come to some genuine light. It should give anyone pause about poetry in the United States.

To his credit, Logan is aware how dicey judgment is. He notes in his introduction that ages are often wrong in their judgments, which is to say that critics such as William Logan are often wrong. Having noted that, he proceeds to demolish (“Loganize” as I have heard various poets put it) many a contemporary reputation in language that ranges from acute to dismissive, from droll to petulant. Reading Logan is like a night with the Marx Brothers—one never knows from what corner the pie is going to be flung but here it comes! No one can say that Logan is cowed by prizes and buzz. On the contrary, the bigger they come (several Nobel Prize winners are cuffed around) the harder they fall. To give an example from the non-Nobel side of the street, he writes

of Jorie Graham's volume *Swarm* that it is "a pocket *Inferno* of poetic sins." Those sins include "vanities of imagination," "gauzy preoccupations," "tedious vacancy" (as opposed to lively vacancy), "visual splatter," "dreamy portentousness," and "vacuous pauses." Adjectives deployed include "pretentious," "numbed," and "overemphatic." This is in a mere three pages, a certain amount of which is devoted to exhibits of the offenses. Logan comes off as a human astringent.

More is going on than name calling, however. Logan knows the history of poetry very well and he compares Graham to Swinburne where "the dangers of style outweigh the advantages." It's a shrewd comparison when one recalls how Swinburne went on for the sake of the afflatus of going on and how Graham goes on and on in a slow motion, awkward trance. In *Swarm* he sees a lyric sensibility going south in search of a vatic, "visionary" mode and coming up with something worse than empty—"the poems gassily expand to fill available space." The issue isn't ambition, for elsewhere he praises a poet such as Anne Carson for taking chances and coming up short. The issue is that notions of poetry replace poetry.

What Logan is noting in Graham is, to a degree, an occupational hazard of making art, namely that the style becomes the master of the artist. Logan is deadly at showing how poets harden into styles or choose styles that seem fashionable or simply stop thinking but continue to write poems. Once a reputation is in motion in contemporary America, it falls under the aegis of public relations as prizes, interviews, and gigs come to the rescue of art. His long, thoughtful essay on Robert Lowell is a cautionary tale in this regard as one watches Lowell collapse under the weight of his achievement writing "last poems" that "are frantic and worthless addenda to his earlier achievement." Lowell's example is sobering, and reading Logan on this and that contemporary poet is sobering when one realizes how much work goes into forging a style and then how much work must go into resisting a style. Auden, among others, commented on this but it didn't stop him from falling in his last years into his own slough.

Lowell, along with Auden, is one of the mountains that constitute the Poetry Himalayas. The book features pieces on Milton and Shakespeare (the latter essay unrepentantly niggling as he butts heads with Helen Vendler and offers emendations of suspect lines). Lowell we learn is "stronger" than Bishop of whose work Logan writes, "A reader can nevertheless grow tired of poems with so much charm and not a particle of intellect." As usual, he overstates the case but, as usual, there is a more than a gram of truth in his perception. Still, she is a "major poet who often pretended to be a minor one"—a crucial part of Bishop's psychology. Plath is part of the range (volcanic). Then there are references to Donne and Pope and Swift—large mountains that dwarf contemporary anthills.

To some this sort of ranking may seem stupidly macho, a version of my team can whup your team (though Plath, for one, as Logan notes in his clear-eyed essay on her journals was keen on such invidious comparisons). What, after all, does such ranking matter? The answer is that it doesn't but it is a way of keeping hierarchic order in the classroom. And it is there that Logan sits—in the classroom. He is an academic and his view of poetry is academic, which is to say it

focuses on the writing as writing and lets the verbal chips fall where they may. In one sense, this is apt—poetry is wrought language and wants to be judged as such. If Shakespeare is the standard, then every poet better start doing more pushups.

In another sense, it is sadly beside the point. We go to poetry for emotional sustenance. It isn't a parlor game with words. The people who write it not infrequently go off the tracks because of the intensity that the work demands. Poetry seizes people—both writers and readers and often doesn't let go. Logan's own student, Joe Bolton, about whom Logan strikes a rare, personal note, would be a powerful case in point. It's worth lingering over Bolton's case because his piece on Bolton shows in relief the virtues and shortcomings of his approach. He is lucid about Bolton's shortcomings—"the intensity and finish of his verse are marked by sometimes grinding repetition"—and wonderfully astute about his virtues—"I don't know any young poet who has his lack of vanity"—and—"They [his poems] had so many possible ways of going wrong, it's breathtaking how often their flirtation with the mysterious went right."

It's plain that Logan values Bolton very much but he can't bring himself to make a claim for the permanent value of Bolton's work. To say that Bolton is an American Keats is to overstate the case but it is to make the reader aware of the very rare value of Bolton's poetry—something remarkable occurred, something that will never be duplicated and something that can put the reader under a spell. It is the job of the critic to dispel the confused clouds that surround any reputation but this dispelling may sacrifice something precious, something that makes poetry what it is in the first place—the mystery of articulated feeling that can't be broken down or analyzed and that moves us deeply. Again, though one can note how narrow Bolton's subject matter was, how addicted he was to the blues of loss, he is as moving a poet as this country has produced. Anyone who has encountered a poem such as Bolton's "Childhood" (not mentioned by Logan) is not going to forget it. The poem engages the raw wounds that Edwin Arlington Robinson approached obliquely but powerfully and while it acknowledges the decorum of understatement, it mingles bleakness, anguish and tenderness in ways that are very close to unbearable.

Logan calls Bolton "one of the faceless mass of migrant young poets." There is a truth to the phrase that one doesn't find in ads for M.F.A. programs but it also makes me wince. No one is faceless, least of all a poet. One feels here and one feels in the book in general, a shudder at the conditions mass society has created and that poetry is willy-nilly implicated in. This being America, we try to make the best of it and turn vices—careerism and publicity, for instance—into virtues. There is something comic in Logan's self-appointed plight as he is besieged by more and more books and more and more false claims. There is something awful too, because Logan is overmatched and the extremity, at times, of his views seems to stem from this feeling of how lost the endeavor is, that we already have more assertive individuality than we know what to do with. Given that state of disunion, it is easy to see how the emotional depth of poetry can be taken for granted, overlooked or dismissed—or all three. Logan is so concerned with how poetry is misused that he can forget its crucial errands.

Thus, when he derides C.K. Williams, for instance, as “the guilt-ridden Peeping Tom of American poetry,” he alludes to Williams’s penchant for looking at the dark side of the street he does not live on but feels mightily about. What he doesn’t delve into is how Williams’s poetry, at its best, is able to make us feel the profound uneasiness that afflicts us, as we inhabit the provisional public spaces of latter-day America. However flat the poet falls, the errand on which the poet embarks is worth noting. If we don’t do this, we fall into a responsive automatism that precludes any thinking about what poetry can be. To a degree, this is an occupational hazard of reviewing. Yet rarely does Logan seize a book as a chance to take a broader look at what the United States is embracing (or rejecting) as poetry. One applauds his scrupulosity, on one hand, and regrets his lack of larger vision, on the other.

Given the space he devotes to what annoys him, any reader of Logan is bound to wonder what, beyond the certified heights of poetry, this guy does like. What Logan commends—and I sympathize with him—are moral function, *gravitas* and moral responsibility—to cite three phrases from reviews of Glyn Maxwell, Karl Kirchwey and Elizabeth Spires, respectively. Though none of these books gets off scot-free, what moves Logan is the willingness on the poets’ part to engage life on terms other than anecdotal personal history. It’s plain that he’s weary of how the first person pronoun stacks deck after deck in book after book. It’s understandable that in all three of the books, the poems he commends show the poet getting out of his or her self, as Maxwell observes American mores, Kirchwey writes about a Chardin painting and Spires engages “the demands of myth.” None of these poets achieve in the poems that are cited anything resembling the certified heights but then that’s why the heights are the heights. Given the strenuous overstatement surrounding too much contemporary American poetry, the quiet intensity Logan praises is a relief of sorts. “Moral” is a word that was shouted down by the likes of “transgressive” a few decades ago as being the equivalent of “moralism.” It remains, however, a word that speaks to responsibilities that go beyond pyrotechnics and sincerity.

Logan’s penchant for sweeping the board clean may be personal inclination on his part and it may be due to the sheer vulgarity of an age in which personality subsumes poetry; historic awareness is abhorrent; and stylistic yips (as in Graham’s *Swarm*) are paraded as genius. To see poetry infected with glibness is an unhappy sight. Yet as Logan notes in his introduction, it has always been so. Socialization takes art to the mat; fashion mars judgment; novelty stupefies intelligence. If Logan is wrongheaded at times—blowing off Berryman’s *Dream Songs* as “a period piece”—and meanly breezy—he calls Yusef Komunyakaa’s poems that include such matters as soldiers dying in tunnels in Vietnam “crudely and garrulously romantic”—his willingness to engage the arduous work of making sense of what one’s age offers is commendable, to say nothing of his feeling for how hard won yet fragile poetic tradition is. In the background of Logan’s endeavor one feels the age’s indifference to the primal ties of meter, its devotion to newness (a by-product of the American belief in progress) and the boosterism of a perennial modernism. These claims and conditions form an unhappy chorus.

The desire to be liked mars a good deal of contemporary American poetry, as the poet plays to a coterie or lathers on the accessible amiability. Whatever one thinks of him, no one can accuse William Logan of going out of his way to be likable. Being a critic, Logan notes, is a fraternity but “no one but an idiot would want to join.” Although one sees more and more reviews that plainly ape Logan in their willingness to break kneecaps, such reviews rarely go beyond cavils that show the critics are intent on asserting their own point of view—however tendentious that view that may be. Logan’s book is rooted, as he says, in a “seriousness intended as respect.” Perhaps if we weren’t such egotists, we might write a little better—or perhaps not. As Logan makes plain, it is a very trying art. There are no guarantees.

And speaking of that accessible amiability, “Here comes Billy Collins!” It’s hard to resist exclamation marks for this maestro of bonhomie. If poetry were the Ed Sullivan Show, then Billy Collins would be on most Sunday nights mugging in an endearing yet winning yet charming yet ingratiating yet self-aware yet amusing way. I can see my grandmother in front of the television set. She has taken her false teeth out, swallowed her ritual evening dose of milk of magnesia and is in the mood for something upbeat yet sensitive, winning yet not overbearing. She is in the mood not for the Beatles (“that hair”) or Jimmy Durante (“ugly”) but Billy Collins (“a poet!”).

If Billy Collins’ recent book, *The Trouble with Poetry and Other Poems*, were a painting it might be titled “Cozy with Shadows.” The cozy aspect is due to the domesticity that forms the background for many of the poems. The poet is in a bathtub or taking a shower or walking along a beach in Florida or having a ham sandwich or a cold bottle of beer or at the worst he is under the covers while waiting for a room to warm up. Although it’s true that not everyone is Lord Byron gallivanting around Europe nor Rimbaud being nasty, I found myself getting a tad irritated with the creature comfort factor. What did these decors have to do with poetry? Again, I knew Horace, for one, liked to talk about what he ate but he was a moral gossip, too. Billy Collins is not that. Domesticity forms a sort of emotional décor in which the poems can pupate to their hearts’ content, a cocoon.

All is not ever well, however. He is aware of the shadows that hover above even the gladdest moments. In one poem he announces after a domestic snapshot of someone “grinding coffee beans into a powder” that “we were all going to die.” What a bummer and what a discovery! This bad news is tempered by the vision of his sweetheart exercising on a treadmill machine. Said sweetheart has a “toothy, immortal-looking smile.” Such smiles are okay in my black book and probably were in Lord Byron’s, too. Even though the poet has admitted death into his purview, it’s not happening today. No missiles are getting shot into his village from the next village. No kid on the street is going to come up to him with a gun and a bad look in his eyes. No automobile is going to go off the road. Or maybe one of these will happen. Now is now and the poet is happy with that. “Immortal-looking” is mildly, sweetly ironic. It is an effect Billy Collins is very good at.

Poems are contraptions and Billy Collins makes ones that follow the classic recipe of whimsy. Imagine a situation, taking a hot shower, for instance. (True, the situation might not be an actual one, but since poems are made up the poet has the benefit of the metaphysical doubt.) Then imagine yourself elsewhere—in ancient China, for instance. Write some about ancient China—“jade and mulberries” (yes, it sounds like a junior high geography report but that’s part of the charm of it). Even better write about “a young woman in a tight-fitting silk dress.” Now you’re talking! Then fade out to an image—“her painted, slightly parted lips.” *Voilà*, you have a poem entitled “Evening Alone.” Not an immortal piece of work but more than tolerable, another credit in the poetry ledger.

Billy Collins writes this poem over and over. There’s nothing inherently wrong with that; poetry is an obsessive endeavor. Look at Shakespeare’s sonnets for starters. Collins, however, is not one to vex himself with the privations of repetitive form. He paddles along in a loose iambic and blows bubbles that are not so much gossamer as amiable knock-offs, metaphors with a sweet, adroit turn to them and a voice that is modest yet pleasing. Given the sheer ease of the poems it comes as little surprise that in the title poem he admits that what poetry most fills him with is “the urge to write poetry.” Collins is the spokesman for the “Let’s write more poems” movement that has quite a following at this particular juncture in what used to be called “civilization.” Whether the world needs those poems is immaterial. And to be honest, who knows what the world at large has ever needed? No one called up Whitman or Dickinson with orders for three large odes and a half of a palinode. Writing one more poem seems worth a try. You never know.

But of course you do know. Where poems go is saluted at the end of the title poem. There, Collins refers to *A Coney Island of the Mind* by Lawrence Ferlinghetti, a book that Collins carried through “the treacherous halls of high school.” It is indicative of Collins’ glancing approach that he ends his complaint of sorts about poetry with that phrase. Ah, yes, high school is tricky. It can be even worse than tricky. And treachery is no small thing. It can wound us for a lifetime—but not in a Billy Collins poem. A Billy Collins poem is managed and rehearsed, a sort of self-dialogue that goes so far and no further. Whimsy is like that. It can have things both ways: the shiver of creation and the amiable comfort of resolution. It can recognize difficulty but does not have to indulge it. It can keep raw life on a tight but comfortable leash. Now and then whimsy can go bounding off into polite anarchy as in Lewis Carroll. But that will not happen in a Billy Collins poem where the efficacy of the poet’s imagination triumphs again and again. Coleridge should have been so lucky.

The problem with such efficient amiability is that nothing is really at stake. The poem can insist that something is at stake—surely, his sweetheart’s smile is important. But it is like a detail on wallpaper, part of the decorative whole. The poem is not an encounter with something stubbornly outside the poet but an arrangement, an assemblage born of fancy. The poet’s will is unassailable because it is the will that makes the poems, the will that drives the ego that seizes upon moments, situations and words and turns them into poems. Even when the poet is observing something outside his domestic domain, for instance a building in “a bombed-out city,” he winds up “in another country” where a woman is “sliding out / the wooden pegs of a wicker hamper / filled

with bread, cheese, and several kinds of olives.” (There is a genteel color-catalogue quality to Collins’ domesticity. Styrofoam coolers and brown paper bags need not apply.) Such a conclusion makes me think that ending a poem with an image may have become not merely a cliché but a moral and aesthetic failing. The image is supposed to express everything—or nothing. How can one interrogate an image? Cut free from the unhappy proclivity to make telling statements that arise from the intensity of dramatic moments, poetry is content to “show.” Probably the people in the bombed out building weren’t dining on “several kinds of olives” when the bombs fell. The poet doesn’t speculate on their fate in any case.

It isn’t only that the poem never gets into focus about where this building might be, as if the facts of history were irrelevant, which perhaps they are to the person examining a photograph though not to the people whose house it was. It’s that the emphasis is on the careful description of the scene. One feels poetry’s witty breath fogging the glass of mere reality—“the sink sinking to its knees.” Yet those descriptions—the view is likened to a dollhouse or “a room on a stage”—are never developed. The poem is content with its picturesque pathos (“a light snow is falling”—what else?). The initial premise—“How suddenly the private / is revealed in a bombed out city”—is made good on. And we are reminded that not everyone is in this situation. Some people are out picnicking and enjoying an assortment of olives. The good life goes on while the bad life stays in photographs.

What’s curious in this poem—and it is representative of how Collins works—is that nothing really happens. I mean this not merely in the literal sense of narrative within the poem but in the sense of the poet seizing his materials and doing something with them. The poem is happy to be voyeuristic, to offer its tender gravity as a gift of sorts and then depart. Poetry can make something out of nothing and poetry can make nothing out of something. It’s a neat trick. In this sense, Collins deserves the acclaim he has reaped. All that burdensome grief the likes of Plath, Lowell and Berryman took on (to name a few names) is beside the point. A poem isn’t a place where you are fighting for your life or where you are bearing down on some dire regret or historical contumely. It’s a place you dawdle in for a time, register some of the amenities of being above ground and a few of the twinges that go with being human. Or you simply provide some droll *shtick*, as in a whole poem that mocks the foolish explanations that poets provide before reading a poem. “The Introduction” can stand beside similar Collins poems in which he sends up some species of pretension. It’s good fun—something that a lot of poetry isn’t.

One wonders about the effect of entertainment in our society. When we aren’t working, we want to be entertained, to be in an agreeable oblivion that sates our senses and allows us to keep on working, commuting, talking on two cell phones at the same time, etc. Is poetry an entertainment? Frost was willing to ham it up but he was also a trickster who was coating some very bitter pills. He didn’t even read a poem aloud such as “Out, Out...” because he thought it too cruel. Collins is cut from very different cloth, a poet who is content to register pleasure though not passion, interest but not mania, consideration but not investigation. Perhaps he is the perfect poet for this age, at once good-natured and astute. What is all the fuss about out there in these years that have seen increasing climate change, the greatest debacle in the history of

American foreign affairs and the erosion of civil liberties? Things are okay with me. That may be what the United States will have to say to history. In such a case, Billy Collins is an exemplary poet.