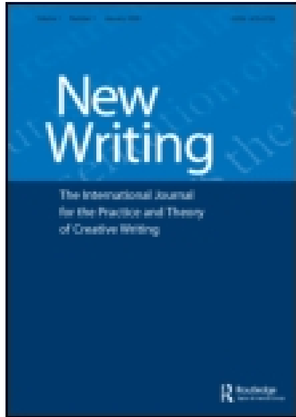
This article was downloaded by: [University of Canberra]
On: 26 September 2011, At: 18:46
Publisher: Routledge
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



New Writing

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rmnw20

''His Face Bore a Striking Resemblance to My Father's'': On the Poet's Internal Critic

Paul Magee [a]

[a] School of Creative Communication, University of Canberra, Canberra, Australia

Available online: 06 Jul 2011

To cite this article: Paul Magee (2011): ''His Face Bore a Striking Resemblance to My Father's'': On the Poet's Internal Critic, New Writing, 8:2, 114-131

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14790726.2010.550926

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

Downloaded by [University of Canberra] at 18:46 26 September 2011

'His Face Bore a Striking Resemblance to My Father's': On the Poet's Internal Critic

Paul Magee
School of Creative Communication, University of Canberra, Canberra, Australia

An analysis of what Mayakovsky, Auden, Jarrell and other modern poets have written about their editing practices reveals a tension between the modernist proclamation that 'there are no rules' (Mayakovsky) and the fact that poets nonetheless need to find some sort of critical standard by which to edit their own work. In the case of an extreme egomaniac like Mayakovsky, one might be tempted to equate that critical standard with the massive law of his own ego – were it not that some part of him clearly finds its productions at times wanting. But if so, where does that critical voice come from? Upon what does it base its judgements? The psychoanalytic theory of the super-ego is key to my argument, which poses a challenge not merely to New Criticism's ideas about objective judgement, but also to the Freudian, and now common-sense, equation between the artist's work and the freedom of unconscious utterance. It suggests that such freedom comes by way of the critical voice in one's own head.

doi: 10.1080/14790726.2010.550926

Keywords: Composition, authorship, criticism, editing, poetry, the muse

Guilt

I begin with an excerpt from an interview with filmmaker Ingmar Bergman, for in it he delineates with great clarity an intimate relation between guilt and artistry. I will then turn to the 20th and 21st century poets who form my proper subject, and will seek to identify related themes in their analyses of their own production processes. This will lead me to a discussion of the moral demands of post-Enlightenment art more generally. I am tackling this topic because the familiar understanding of the artist's work as a species of play – such as we find in Freud's writings, and in many other places both academic and popular – seems to me thoroughly one-sided. It completely ignores the question of aesthetic judgement, the difficulty of which becomes extreme in the post-Enlightenment era.

Compare Bergman. The interview I'm referring to was conducted by Malou von Sivers in the year 2000. It opens with footage of Bergman sitting down and immediately instructing von Sivers' crew to rearrange the lighting. The interview begins. Von Sivers asks Bergman about his reputation for outbursts on the set. The discussion that ensues has Bergman talking about the guilt that plagued him, while still a young man, for being such a terrible person. Once in a rage he threw a bag of 78s out the window of a radio studio; he was

© 2011 Taylor & Francis

unfaithful in love, a liar and a cheat. On the other hand, he describes feeling no guilt at all for a pre-meditated physical assault upon a journalist who had been overly critical of him and his associates: 'I hate that man, even though he's dead. I hate him still. May he burn in Hell.' Bergman wasn't necessarily the nicest person. What's interesting is what he did with his guilt:

> **Bergman:** I had a strict upbringing. I was brought up – It was very common in those days to be brought up to have a guilty conscience. It was used as a part of your upbringing. Later on – I was a deserter and a cheat in many ways, and a liar and – I went from one to the other, and behaved like a big shit, an arsehole. Finally, it became unbearable, so I decided not to have a guilty conscience. In the end it felt pretentious to have a guilty conscience about the hurt I'd caused people. So I got rid of my guilty conscience.
>
> **von Sivers:** How do you do that?
>
> **Bergman:** A guilty conscience is one thing, a sense of guilt is another. I could never eliminate my feelings of guilt, but in order to get rid of my guilty conscience, I decided to become the world's best professional. I decided there wouldn't be any limits to what I wanted to accomplish in my profession. It was all very inter-related, my feelings of total failure on a personal level and the fact that I wanted to compensate for that by becoming as good a professional as I could possibly be. And this in turn brought with it a lot of other decisions. It brought a tremendously austere way of living, meticulousness, punctuality, sobriety, and an orderliness that was often a pain in the neck for my colleagues because I demanded it from them too (von Sivers, 2000).

The burden of the following will be to see how far the moral economy Bergman describes might be true of other artists as well. If it is representative it will offer a curious support and explanation for the image – which is not entirely mythical – of the modern artist as anarchistic, asocial and just generally out of control. The explanation would be that artists don't need to feel guilty about their infractions of social mores and even legislations for the simple reason that they get their guilt elsewhere. They find it in their relation to the work itself.

This argument will, in short, seek to assert that contemporary artistic practice is as much beholden to the super-ego as it is to the unconscious. Having offered a nutshell version of it in the above paragraphs, I'll now take the argument through its specific stages. I'll leave the Freudian terminology aside, and even the concept of guilt, to focus simply on the question of artistic egotism. I'll also shift from the realm of film, and from Bergman, one of my early gods, to the field of my research proper: nineteenth, 20th and early 21st century poetry.

On Two Types of Egotism

I'll start by tackling the counter-argument that immediately presents itself: far from guilty or self-effacing, aren't poets actually the greatest of egotists?

Downloaded by [University of Canberra] at 18:46 26 September 2011

What could be more egotistical, more lacking in shame, than to demand that others read one's verse?

Vladimir Mayakovsky, whose first book was entitled *I*, and whose last *At the Top of My Voice*, would seem to be a case in point. Mayakovsky's prose autobiography, characteristically entitled *I, Myself*, describes the poet's discovery of Shakespeare, Byron and Tolstoy at age 15, and while serving an 11 month prison sentence in Butyrki:

> The authors I read were the so called great ones, but how easy to write better than they! I had already acquired a correct attitude toward the world. I needed only experience in art. (qtd in Blake 1975: 15).

Hardly a humble comment.

What, on the other hand, of Mayakovsky's dedication to the October revolution? Already at age 12 he was stealing his father's sawn-off shotguns and handing them over to the local Social Democratic committee; he was jailed for revolutionary agitation while still a teenager, and in later poems would go so far as to proclaim: 'I feel/like a Soviet factory/Manufacturing happiness' (qtd in Jakobson 1985: 118). But could that dedication really be separated from the poet's desire to channel his own massively public self-revolutions?

> Then I
> shall root up my soul:
> I'll trample it hard
> till it spread
> in blood; and I offer you this as a banner. (1975: 85)

Shklovsky wrote that Mayakovsky 'entered the Revolution as he would his own home' (qtd in Cohen 2008: 187), while Trotsky was more than a little suspicious:

> The Greeks were anthropomorphists, naively likening the forces of nature to themselves; our poet is a Majakomorphist, and he populates the squares, the streets and the fields of the Revolution only with himself (qtd in Jakobson 1985: 114)

I am not going to disagree with this characterisation of Mayakovsky as an egotist.

> My 'I' is too small for me
> Something obstinately bursts out of me. (1975: 71)[1]

But I do think it needs to be supplemented. For there are at least two types of egotism.

A comment of Roman Jakobson's will help open up the contrast I want to make here. In the article he wrote shortly after Mayakovsky's suicide, Jakobson described a conversation with the poet in the late 1920s:

> During one of our meetings, Majakovskij, as was his custom, read me his later poems. Considering his creative potential I could not help comparing them with what he might have produced. 'Very good,' I said, 'but not as good as Majakovskij.' (Jakobson 1985: 111)

Downloaded by [University of Canberra] at 18:46 26 September 2011

Jakobson's comment clarifies that Mayakovsky's egotism was, precisely because of his occupation as a poet, subject to the judgement of another. Mayakovsky could be accused of not getting himself right.

Compare a contemporary anecdote detailing Mayakovsky's response to a heckler at one of his post-revolutionary poetry readings: 'Mayakovsky,' the heckler called out, 'you consider yourself a proletarian poet-collectivist and you're always writing I, I, I.' (Kassil 2008: 16). To which the poet responded:

> Well, what do you think. Nicholas the Second, was he a collectivist? He always wrote, We, We, Nicholas the Second. (16)

Mayakovsky's disparaging reference to the Czarist plural is a reminder that egotism is not confined to the first person singular. In fact, the first person plural has a remarkable affinity for it too. I am referring not merely to the royal plural, which amounts to a repudiation of the other's right to judge (the Czar is answerable to no-one – or rather, We are answerable to no-one), but also the popularist plural ('We, the people'), which so curiously echoes the royal plural in this regard. In the case of the popularist plural, you can't even pin down which part of it claims responsibility. As linguist Emile Benveniste puts it, the chief characteristic of the word 'we' is its 'limitlessness' (1971: 204); those it 'annexes' to the speaker's ego constitute 'an indistinct mass of other persons' (203). The fact that it provides such a hazy alibi is, of course, why popularist politicians love to use it. It provides a perfect vehicle for egomaniacal acts. Note how often George Bush liked to use it.

It is necessary, in short, to distinguish between two types of egotism. For Mayakovsky's Mayakomorphism was in fact and in contrast a form of responsibility – and an extremely demanding one at that. John Berger and Anya Bostock comment on the extraordinary openness to critique that characterises it. They point out that Mayakovsky's language, however egomaniacal, is actually always implicitly addressed to a 'you':

> The *you* may be a woman, God, a party official, but the way of presenting the poet's life to the power being addressed remains similar. The *you* is not to be found in the life of the *I*. Poetry is the making of poetic sense of the poet's life for the use of another. One might say this is more or less true of all poetry. (Berger and Bostock 2008: 22)

They add that in 'this idea is implanted the principle that the poetry will be justified or not by its reception' (203). Mayakovsky could be faulted for not getting himself right.

Narcissus disbelieves in the unknown

Mayakovsky's answerable egotism already takes me part of the way toward an argument about the function of guilt in poetic production. But before I can make the links between his practice and that argument, I need to clarify that his case –

> With far-flung steps, I crumple miles of streets,
> where shall I go, hiding within me hell? (1975: 111)

Downloaded by [University of Canberra] at 18:46 26 September 2011

– is generalisable to that of other poets –

> At bricks I bawl, thrusting the dagger of desperate words
> into the swollen pulp of the sky (1975: 57)

For he might seem quite extreme company:

> On you,
> steeped in love,
> who watered the centuries with tears,
> I'll turn my back, fixing
> the sun like a monocle
> into my gaping eye. (1975: 89)

Mayakovsky, the suicide, is extreme. But so is Mayakovsky the revolutionary. Then again, what great modern poet does not combine elements of both? And what are we to make of Berger and Bostock's implication that Mayakovsky's characteristic mode of address – *an I addressing a you, a you with the right to judge* – is representative of poetry more generally? I'll now attempt to demonstrate that modern poetry's mode of address is just that.

The reason for this has much to do with the way modern poetry is authorised. A poem is authorised in the first person singular of the poet uttering it.

I introduced this idea briefly above, when comparing Mayakovsky's answerable egotism to the evasions potentiated by the word 'we'. Mayakovsky has no recourse to a group identity that might serve to absolve him of responsibility for his work. W.H. Auden makes a similar point, in his discussion of the professional practice of poetry: it's not a profession at all. The fact that you've practiced poetry in the past is no guarantee that you'll be able to do it in the future: the poet

> Will never be able to say: 'Tomorrow I will write a poem, and thanks to my training and experience, I already know I shall do a good job.' In the eyes of others, a man is a poet if he has written one good poem. In his own, he is only a poet at the moment when he is making his last revision to a new poem. The moment before he was still only a potential poet; the moment after, he is a man who has ceased to write poetry, perhaps forever. (1975: 41)

The poet has no professional alibi. Now the world might well act as if poets did – but then again, the world also pretends that there is such a thing as the first person plural. Actually, there is no such thing. It is clear, Benveniste writes, 'that the oneness and subjectivity inherent in the 'I' contradict the possibility of a pluralisation.' (1971: 202) That is to say, when I use the word 'we' I do not mean 'I+I+I'. I am not pluralising myself. 'We is not a multiplication of identical objects, but a junction between "I" and "non-I"' (202). It's really a word that 'I' use to make a claim on a whole lot of other people. The word 'we' is as often as not an obfuscation of one's individual responsibility, and so would be the idea of poetry as a profession.

Both Auden and Mayakovsky rule out the possibility that poets might justify their verse in this manner, as 'we poets'. But that's not all. They also rule

Downloaded by [University of Canberra] at 18:46 26 September 2011

out the idea that any impersonal form of authority might serve to ground what they do. 'In general,' Mayakovsky writes, in 'How are Verses to be Made', 'there are no . . . rules'; the fact is that one 'is called a poet precisely because he creates these same poetic rules.' (1972: 125). In other words, one must write poetry that is so original and authoritative that others will take it as their rule. Only those others are no longer poets. They aren't manufacturing poetry at all, but rather taking refuge 'behind the backsides of historic monuments.' (123). As for all those guidebooks which provide the rules that could serve to justify one's efforts – the 'correct title for these books would not be *How to Write*, but *How They Used to Write*.' (129). None of these impersonal sources can provide an alibi for one's work. Once more, Auden corroborates Mayakovsky's stance. He diagnoses the characteristic flaw of the beginning poet as the tendency to produce 'an imitation of poetry in general' (Auden 1975: 36). Poetry is not general.

Compare Auden's contemporary, the poet-critic Randal Jarrell. Jarrell uses this same phrase to say what is wrong with the work of a certain A.M. Klein:

> The language has none of the exact immediacy, the particular reality of the language of a successful poem; it has instead the voluntary repetition of the typical mannerisms of poetry in general – mannerisms that become a generalised, lifeless, and magical ritual without the spirit of which they were once the peculiar expression. (1980: 122)

Mayakovsky, Auden and Jarrell come to the same conclusion: poetry authorises itself in the first person singular alone, in the immediacy of the I who speaks.

This is even more apparent when one turns to the sort of things a critic like Jarrell most appreciates: of Emily Dickinson's three volume *Collected*, he raves:

> The reader finishes speechless, and laughing, and shaking his head in helpless wonder . . . all the absolutes and intensives and eccentricities of an absolutely intense eccentric have passed over him like a train of avalanches and left him a couple of hundred feet deep in Knowledge. (1980: 244)

Jarrell adds, in clear praise, that Dickinson is 'one of the most individual writers who ever lived' (244). Now Dickinson's work is replete with the word 'I'. That doesn't mean, however, that Jarrell is simply counting pronouns. Take Elizabeth Bishop's poems, which are far more narratival, and in that respect far more third person, than Dickinson's. Of these poems, Jarrell writes:

> Even their most complicated or troubled or imaginative effects seem, always, personal and natural, and as unmistakeable as the first few notes of a Mahler song, the first few patches of a Vuillard interior. (245)

The best poetry bears the grain of its author's unique voice. Whatever the content of its speech, the voice itself will be 'unmistakeable'. It's that very unmistakeability that serves – as in Mayakovsky's case – to authorise the verse. Only one is never really alone there:

Downloaded by [University of Canberra] at 18:46 26 September 2011

Narcissus disbelieves in the unknown;
He cannot join his image in the lake
So long as he assumes he is alone. (1976: 312)

For the effect of such a radically unprofessional, unguaranteed and immediate voice is to draw the reader into the picture.

I cited Emile Benveniste's 1946 essay 'The Relationships of Persons in the Verb' a number of times above. I am going to cite further from this essay, which will help explain how the 'you' comes to play a part in all this. Not content with disproving the existence of the first person plural, Benveniste proceeds to question the notion that there are three grammatical persons. He takes the definitions advanced by Arab grammarians to show how we should properly categorise these functions:

> For them, the first person is *al-mutakallimu*, 'the one who speaks'; the second, *al-muhatabu*, 'the one who is addressed'; but the third is *al-ya-ibu*, 'the one who is absent.' (Benveniste 1971: 195)

In effect, Arab grammarians make a much stronger distinction between the first and second persons, which name partners to a dialogue, and the third person, which names people or things excluded from the dialogue. Benveniste, following them, argues for the radical difference between talking to someone, as I am talking to you, and talking about someone: *he, she* or *it*. That's the third person, talking about an absence, whether a man, a woman, or a rock. It can't reply because it is by definition excluded from the conversation. It's on these grounds that Benveniste expels the third person from the category of personhood altogether. He calls it not 'the third person', but the 'non-person' (195). Benveniste probably wouldn't have had much time for 'poetry-in-general' either.

The first and second, *I* and *you*, are the only real persons. This is probably why God, in Sufi writing, is so frequently figured in the second person. When reading Sufi poets you have to realise that the word 'you' will stand either for 'you' the reader, or perhaps for 'You' which is also the Sufi name for God. It makes sense. After all, if God is everywhere, how could you talk about Him in the non-person, as if He were just a rock? So the great saint Rabia of Basra is reported to have said, on first seeing the Ka'ba at Mecca:

> I see only bricks and a house of stone; how do they profit me? It's You I want. (qtd in Friedlander 1975: 23)

Rabia's exclusion of the 'non-person' from the space of her faith is echoed in the grammars of many Christian mystics as well. The other place where one encounters this exclusion is, I believe, in contemporary poetry. A poem like Les Murray's 'The Quality of Sprawl' – which gets right up my nose – forces you, as reader, to an active encounter with the poet's own way of speaking, demanding you decide whether or not to make your mind responsive to his distinctive voice (Murray in Leonard 2003: 30). Whenever I read Murray, I get the feeling that poetry effectively blots out the third person realms of discourse, turning it all into an encounter between you and me. It's part of the reason why this art form, when you take it on board, is so powerful. It's

Downloaded by [University of Canberra] at 18:46 26 September 2011

direct address, and it's not about anybody else but you. When poets use words like 'he' and 'she' they're really thinking about the effect their words will have on you. Their aim is not so much representation, as rather the inside of your head.

So long as he assumes he is alone.

Clearly I'm speaking figuratively, when claiming that modern poetry's mode of address is fundamentally that of an I addressing a you. Neither Mayakovsky, with his obsession with the word 'I', nor the Sufis, who address all real objects as 'You', can be taken as literal models for how modern poets write. For poets do avail themselves of the whole range of pronouns, from 'he', 'she' and 'it' right up to – though rather more rarely – 'we'. Nonetheless, I argue that their address operates along the I/you axis. For what remains, once appeals to the first person plural, and all the related modes of impersonal authorisation, have been stripped away, is a speech situation characterised by that same 'oneness' that, Benveniste argues (1971: 199), pertains to each and every utterance of the words 'I' and 'you'. Being so dependent upon the context that gives them their reference – your relation to the person before you – both pronouns are 'are unique each time they're uttered' (199). The same sense of immediacy pertains to the reading of any great poem. That instant feels utterly personalised, and unique. As Jarrell writes of Dickinson, the egomaniac: 'You live with the poems – or rather with the poet – in an almost intolerable intimacy.' (1980: 244).

This I/you intimacy has two consequences, the first of which is that modern poetry often has intensely erotic effects. It, just like a come-on, shuts out the rest of the world to elicit the tensions inherent between I and you. The second consequence is that the burden of judging the work falls heavily upon its reader. When people complain that modern poetry makes them feel stupid, they are giving voice to a very interesting fact: without the identity of a professional caste, a prior tradition, or a set of rules to validate their work, poets effectively demand that the reader him or herself make the judgement as to whether the I speaking has done so well, or not. The difficulty of such judgement leads to a situation that is highly paradoxical. On the one hand, there's a radically democratic aspect to all this: any you has the right to say of another's poetic I that it's not up to scratch. So Jakobson will criticise Mayakovsky for not being himself as well as he might be. So W.H. Auden will ignore centuries of tradition to suggest, in 'Making, Knowing, Judging,' that we take Coleridge's self-deprecating preface to his masterpiece 'Kubla Khan, or, a Vision in a Dream, A Fragment' quite seriously: 'He saw, I think, as a reader can see, that even the fragment that exists is disjointed and would have to be worked on if he ever completed the poem.' (1975: 33). Critical and canonical traditions exist, but they have no binding authority over the critical voice bold enough to respond to any poet's intimate address. On the other hand, this same radically democratic field brings with it certain readerly anxieties, and nowhere more than when a reader is called upon to make his or her judgement public: What right do I have to judge? How will I know if it's good or bad? Will what I say sound stupid?

Downloaded by [University of Canberra] at 18:46 26 September 2011

A Creature in Youman Form

My argument about guilt will arise from this juncture.

I'll start with the fact that Auden, in making the above comment, is not so much responding critically to 'Kubla Khan', as simply quoting Coleridge's own judgement on it. The novelty of Auden's reading is to take the judgement of the poem expressed in Coleridge's preface literally, rather than as part of the masterpiece's fragmentary aesthetic. Auden takes Coleridge literally because he wants to make the following point: Coleridge, like any poet, is possessed of a 'critical conscience', and it's a ferocious one (Auden 1975: 33). The fact of the matter is that the first and foremost reader of any poem – the one who first experiences that alternately erotic and anxious I/you encounter described above – is the reader within the poet's own head. Such is the opening gambit of 'Making, Knowing Judging', Auden's 1956 Inaugural Lecture as Oxford Professor of Poetry, which I've already cited at length above. Auden starts the lecture with the question 'What is a Professor of Poetry? How can Poetry be *professed*?' and proceeds to answer that challenge in the first person singular. He will talk about that part of him that necessarily professes poetry, that faculty without which he would simply not be a poet. He will talk about his 'Censor' and explain how he developed that critical faculty within him (1975: 33). He will talk about the voice each and every poet necessarily has within his or her head – 'that critic who is only interested in one author and only concerned with works that do not yet exist.' (33). In other words, Auden discusses that part of him that edits his initial drafts, the part that determines just what is worth keeping, and what casting aside. The Censor literally is that part of Auden that professes poetry. It's the judge.

It's worth pausing at this point, because in the light of the foregoing this already begs a huge question: if there is no such thing as a 'professional poet', and 'poetry in general' has nothing to do with poetry, by what standard might a 'Censor' possibly judge? I'll put this question another way: if poetry is speech contracted to the I/you axis of intimate discourse, how can its critic be anything other than another I? Auden not only embraces this possibility, he makes it clear that criticism delivered in such terms is far more intimate, and by the same token, far harsher, than that delivered by any impersonal apparatus of judgement. He's referring to the voice inside the artist's own head. It's another I.

That the Censor's standards of judgement are as subjective as the poet's mode of utterance is apparent from Auden's discussion of how a poet's censor is born. It's not through the internalisation of objective – nor even collective – rules of judgment. It's through the imitation of another person. Recall Auden's strictures, which I cited above, upon the beginning poet's tendency to produce not poetry, but rather 'an imitation of poetry-in-general' (36). As I remarked above, the problem with such work is clear: poetry is not general. The crucial thing to realise is that while generality is a problem, imitation itself is not. Far from regarding it as a problem, Auden sees imitation as the very means by which one develops one's Censor. To this end, he advises the beginning poet to 'get a literary transference upon some poet in particular.' (37). The Freudian terminology is tantalising. But what does Auden actually mean? He means

Downloaded by [University of Canberra] at 18:46 26 September 2011

that one has to appropriate another poet's standard of judgement. In a perfect world, he tells us, the poet's transference 'upon some poet in particular' would be channelled through an apprenticeship. Apprenticed to a master, the budding poet would 'begin by changing his blotting paper, advance to typing his manuscripts and end up by ghost-writing poems he was too busy to start or finish.' (37). We inhabit no such world. In practice, Auden continues, the poet's apprenticeship occurs in the library, and generally among the dead. Yet it's not, for all that, an abstract and impersonal relation. To the contrary, the beginning poet's:

> Passionate admiration for his Master will ensure that he work hard to please him . . . To please means to imitate and it is impossible to do a recognisable imitation of a poet without attending to every detail of his diction, rhythms and habits of sensibility. (38)

The reason this imitative relationship leads to the development of a Censor of one's own has to do with this curious – but I think psychologically accurate – idea that imitation focuses the budding poet on the master's pleasure. For in trying to imitate the master, one is in fact focussing on the sorts of things that would please him so much that he would let them pass into print.

This is really quite extraordinary. Auden is talking about the acquisition of a sense of absolute judgement, and yet he attributes that acquisition to a process that is fundamentally subjective, one as subjective as any actual poetic utterance. The fact that it happens to involve imitating another poet's critical voice – at least at first – shouldn't blind us to how absolute such critical judgements in fact are. Jarrell, who is as awe-struck by Auden's writings as any of us, makes an amusing comment:

> You can't argue with a hog, a Senator, the Epicurean Gods, or the retired Talleyrand – we don't judge Auden, we just enjoy him. (He's over on the other side of Judgement, in a wordy, worldy Limbo of his own.) As we read that 'in my Eden a person who dislikes Bellini has the good manners not to get born', we just say, 'I'm glad I like Bellini.' (1980: 226)

Such judgements are absolute, as absolute as the laws God made for Eden, and yet their genesis – so Auden tells us in 'Making, Knowing, Judging' – is all to do with a person-to-person process of transmission. The objectivity of one's absolute judgement is there theorised as a by-product of one's intersubjectivity. What's more, that's how it obtains its accuracy. What might post-structuralism have to say to that?

There are a number of remarks to make at this juncture. The first is that it makes sense to learn the art of criticism from a person rather than a rule-book, because criticism is itself a person-to-person discourse. This is the paradoxical lesson of W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley's 1946 essay 'The Intentional Fallacy', which attempts to eradicate personhood from the process of judgement altogether. The critic 'who has been sobered by Aristotle and Richards' is indifferent to authorial intentions, or so that essay tells us: 'Judging a poem is like judging a pudding or a machine. One demands that it work.' (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1954: 4). The problem is that Wimsatt and Beardsley offer no explanation as to how such purportedly objective

Downloaded by [University of Canberra] at 18:46 26 September 2011

judgements might be made. How does one decide what works, and what doesn't? Given the repudiation of 'poetry in general' characteristic of the modern art form, the failure to explain this is no small omission – one the invocation of Aristotle, Richards and rigour does little to mask. But actually, that whole idea of impersonal judgement is absurd. As Spinoza demonstrated back in his *Ethics*: 'praise and blame are feelings of joy or, respectively, sorrow, accompanied by the idea of human virtue or weakness as a cause.' (Spinoza 1958: 282).[2] No one criticises a rock, or a tree. One might, on the other hand, criticise 'a pudding or a machine' precisely because a human has had a hand in their making. Criticism is a person-to-person discourse.

What's more – in the absence of any profession or code by which to measure the poet's performance – there's actually nothing else to go on. If, as I've argued here, modern poetry is the voice of an utterly unique I, the only critical demand one can really make is that that I not be stagy about it. The reason for this is as follows: staginess is everywhere, in all walks of life. Almost everywhere you go you find people in whom the desire to be seen as *such and such a person* – e.g. 'a fabulous poet', 'a great wit', but also even just 'a nice person' – predominates over the desire actually to be. There's nothing unique about it.

Of course it's only the most invasive people who will speak directly enough to tell you that you're currently full of it. Then again, in the process of attending so closely to the whims of an actual person expressing his I in the most unique and compelling fashion (Auden reveals that he chose Thomas Hardy as his master, and sought to imitate his each and every characteristic), you must start to get quite intolerant of any shamming:

> Those distinguishing marks a lover sees
>   By instinct and policemen
> Can be trained to observe. (Auden 1976: 604)

What a lover might call a 'foible' will for the critic be the precise point of attack, an attack coming straight from the you addressed to the I who speaks. So much more contestable than the everyday legal pronouncements of our courts, such an attack is by the same token ever so much more intimate. Consider Jarrell's criticism of the later Auden: 'Auden has become the most professional poet in the world.' (1980: 230). What better, slyer, and more brutally accurate way to deflate the pretensions of Auden's Eden than by labelling it 'professional'? It's Jarrell's way of saying that Auden has failed to live up to his own desire as a poet, precisely by becoming one. That's the sort of intimate failing a critic points out, and it's in fact the implicit accusation one finds in the excellent critique of T.S. Elliot's allusions and footnotes with which Wimsatt and Beardsley's conclude their essay (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1954: 14–18). They're actually criticising Elliot's person there, for getting in the way of his work. Note again how much harsher such intimate addresses are than the pronouncements of an impersonal legislature. Now train them upon yourself. That's Auden's message. Jarrell is in fact simply doing what Auden most wants to do to himself.

The final point to make here is that those 'distinguishing marks' are also what one detects in the master. For the real point of taking on a master is not,

Downloaded by [University of Canberra] at 18:46 26 September 2011

ultimately, so as to assume their sense of critical certainty. It's rather that one needs to be thoroughly immersed in that certainty if one is to gauge the extent of the master's hypocrisy. That's what one's censor really needs to learn to spot if it's to come into it's own – or rather, be trained back upon its own.

This is what Auden tells us in 'Making, Knowing, Judging' though one only detects it by attending to some comments that at first blush seem quite paradoxical. Auden begins his discussion of how one develops one's censor by rejecting Mathew Arnold's notion of the '12 Touchstones', those twelve exemplary stanzas, couplets and lines from the past, by which, according to Arnold, all future lines might be judged (1961: 311). What strikes me as paradoxical here is that Arnold's touchstones seem to bespeak a similar imperative to that articulated by Auden: that one eschew general rules, and instead model one's sense of judgement upon exemplars of past excellence. The problem with touchstones, Auden proceeds to state, is that the best poetry is too good; such touchstones are 'likely to turn readers into snobs and to ruin talented poets by tempting them to imitate what is beyond their powers.' (1975: 37). He then comments that it 'is by no means clear that the poetry which influenced Shakespeare's development most fruitfully was the greatest poetry with which he was acquainted.' (37). Auden's own master was Thomas Hardy. The reason, he adds, that it was so valuable for him to spend all that time analysing and then copying Hardy's sense of which 'word or rhythm or form ... is the *right* one' was that Hardy wasn't always right (38). 'Much as I loved him, even I could see that his diction was often clumsy and forced and that a lot of his poems were plain bad.' (38) But why then imitate him?

Auden's paradoxical comments will become clearer if one recalls the intersubjective dynamics of teaching more generally. Allow me to quote Anne Freadman's analysis of Madame de Lafayette's *La Princesse de Clèves*: 'If ever a mother's teaching both promoted feminine virtue and led its receiver to desire its opposite, this ... was surely it.' (1997: 315). Freadman's comment is a reminder that you learn about the world and find your way in it, by attending to the gaps in your parents' speech. Unconscious desire is, in other words, integral to the process Auden is mapping, which is precisely why a poet should follow it. That, at any rate, is how I understand Auden's subsequent, offhand and enigmatic comment about his choice of Hardy: 'curiously enough his face bore a striking resemblance to my father's.' (38). This is the man Auden must outdo.

No wonder the operations of the Censor involve guilt:

> In the eyes of others, a man is a poet if he has written one good poem. In his own, he is only a poet at the moment when he is making his last revision to a new poem.

His own eyes, Auden tells us, are those he wins from an encounter with a elder poet, who might just happen to look like his father. They must hurt at times.

We're now ready to join up some pieces, which I'll do by suggesting that Auden's advice for future poets is much more than mere advice. It's a description of the moral economy of poetic practice more generally. One might codify it as follows: critical judgment, for a poet, is a law-abiding activity, but it

Downloaded by [University of Canberra] at 18:46 26 September 2011

operates in a fundamentally different way to our typical understanding of legal process. The poet's responsibility is not to a prior codification of abstract rules, but rather to the critical voice of another subject. The poet's responsibility is first and foremost to an internalised voice of authority, who speaks to the poet as only another you can. To put this in practical terms what it means is that the poet's task is not simply to summon up those presumably unconscious voices that will provide the poem with its own unique contours. His or her other task is to summon up the voice that will judge, edit and so extract that uniqueness from the rough drafts of its initial manifestation. In both cases, it's an I speaking and responding to a you. There's no plural. And the third person doesn't exist.

The poet is 'a creature in youman form' (Joyce 1976: 36).

Downloaded by [University of Canberra] at 18:46 26 September 2011

Subjective Universality

I'll now proceed to offer two comments on what I've just claimed to be the moral economy of contemporary poetic practice. The first will be to suggest that Kant is the philosopher who comes closest to articulating the type of critical judgement I've just been tracking. The second point will be that Freud gives it its real name; for, as Auden's off-hand filiation comment suggests, we're really talking about a way of manipulating, or being used by, the agencies of the Super-ego. That second comment will thus return me to the ideas hazarded at the start of this paper, in relation to Bergman.

To bring Kant into the picture, allow me to repeat the paradox I tabled above, and marked as a challenge for post-structuralism. A poet's 'Censor' speaks to them with all the subjectivity of another poet, a Thomas Hardy for instance. Yet in these highly subjective tones the Censor articulates judgements of universal significance. Far from representing a paradox, this, according to Kant, is precisely how aesthetics operates. His *Critique of the Power of Judgement* will help me further to illustrate the phenomenon I am tracing here: the moral economy of contemporary poetry, that strange combination of highly individualised intimate speech and universal responsibility.

The key issue is Kant's claim that judgements of taste are 'subjective' (2000: 89). I'll rely on a quote from Les Murray to initiate this discussion. In it Murray describes the 'poetic experience':

> At any intensity it is quite unmistakeable. Anyone reading a Shakespeare play who has come on a passage that made their breathing tighten and alter in a way resembling fear, and felt their mind gripped by a crowding excitement in which vivid activity and arresting awe seemed to grapple with each other, had experienced poetry. (1990: 165)

Murray's description of the 'poetic experience' illustrates what Kant has in mind when he argues that judgements of taste are subjective. Such judgements are less concerned with the relation of a representation to some reality in the world, than with the effect a representation has upon the person experiencing it. Does it create 'pleasure or displeasure' in its viewer (Kant 2000: 89)? This is what Kant means in saying that judgements of taste are subjective. It's that they are based upon the subjective experiences of one's own body.

We have to be careful here, to avoid a misunderstanding. For us, to say that something is subjective tends to mean that it is relative: you will have a different opinion on the matter depending on whether you come from this or that culture, whether you are this or that type of person. Actually Kant means exactly the opposite to this. For judgements of taste, though based upon the subjective effect an artwork has upon one's own body, are in fact universal. When you make them you expect everyone else to agree with you. This is apparent in the distinction Kant makes between two types of judgements. The first concerns what the subject finds 'agreeable'. Characteristic of this type of judgement is that nobody expects their tastes to coincide with those of other people:

> With regard to the agreeable, everyone is content that his judgement, which he grounds on a private feeling, and in which he says of an object that it pleases him, be restricted merely to his own person. Hence he is perfectly happy if, when he says that sparkling wine from the Canaries is agreeable, someone else should improve his expression and remind him that he should say 'It is agreeable to me' . . . For one person, the colour violet is gentle and lovely, for another dead and lifeless. One person loves the tone of wind instruments, another that of stringed instruments. (2000: 97)

It would, Kant adds, be 'folly to dispute the judgement of another that is different than our own in such a matter' (97). It is an entirely different matter with judgements of taste. Such judgements are subjective, in the sense given above, and yet the one who makes them demands that all others agree with him. 'He rebukes them if they judge otherwise and denies that they have taste' (98). One cannot, Kant adds, simply say *to each their own*, without denying this modality of judgement altogether. For the very principle of what Kant calls the judgement of taste is that its judgements have 'a rightful claim to the assent of everyone' (98). This is the mode of judgement one encounters in art criticism, and indeed (as Auden, that 'creature in youman form', makes clear) in artistic production. Kant describes its claims as those of a 'universal subjective validity' (103).

Anyone who has ever felt belittled by another for making a stupid call on a poem or a painting will know exactly the distinction Kant is drawing. Such a person may well take solace in Kant's insistence that the universal validity in question is not that of 'a theoretical objective necessity, where it can be cognised *a priori* that everyone **will feel** this satisfaction.' (121, emphasis original). What the judge of taste does rather is offer 'a judgement that is regarded as an example of a universal rule that one cannot produce' (121). It can't be founded on experience, but instead bases itself on the presupposition of a 'common sense', which itself is 'a merely ideal norm' (123). Yet the solace is only so great. For the theoretical difficulty of whether a 'common sense' exists or not does nothing to alter the fact that we do indeed produce and judge artworks as if it exists. The fact that paintings have such an affinity for valorisation in the capitalist marketplace, that other key source of contemporary universal value, is indicative of their formal affinity for judgements cast in such terms. And it's clearly not just a matter of money, as the example of

Downloaded by [University of Canberra] at 18:46 26 September 2011

contemporary Australian poets like Murray demonstrates. They have almost nothing pecuniary to gain from the production of their works, and yet they too judge them, and seek them to be judged, by the dictates of a 'universal subjective validity'. Yet the solace of this second set of arguments as to art's affinity for universalisation is also only so great. For all the accuracy and excellence with which many wield it, it is clear – and Kant himself makes it clear, almost as clear as Auden – that 'universal subjective validity' can only ever, and ultimately, be an imposture, a place marker for the critic's own desire. Thank God for our critics.Thank God for our critics, for their desire is to elicit the poet's own desire.

Thank God for the Super-ego

I now want to return to Bergman's assertion that the agency he trained to observe his work critically was in fact his sense of guilt. I see a very real link between this idea and Auden's offhand implication ('curiously enough his face bore a striking resemblance to my father's') that he trained his 'Censor' along the lines of a parental identification. For that is precisely what the super-ego is: an internalised figure of authority that serves to maintain the fantasy of those parental eyes that gaze so lovingly upon the perfect child one is and always remains. This delightful phantasy is maintained, Freud argues, through the severe rebukes the super-ego visits upon any aspects of the adult ego that fail to merit such a loving regard (1984: 91). In effect, the super-ego is an agency of mourning, mourning for the lost paradise we once were. And its demands are implacable.

Consider Auden's comments on the pleasure a poet finally feels at the end of his long apprenticeship; the poet has finally reached the point where 'his Censor is able to say truthfully and for the first time: ''All the words are right, and all the words are yours.''' With characteristic cruelty Auden adds that the poet's 'thrill at hearing this does not last long, however, for a moment later comes the thought: ''Will it ever happen again?''' (1975: 41). One has to wonder why Auden felt compelled to produce so many masterpieces, why Bergman made so many films. Why did they put themselves so in thrall to the ceaseless demands that only another you can make? Bergman gives us part of the answer in the interview cited above. He had no choice but to feel a sense of crushing guilt for his patent inadequacies. So why not at least make art out of it?

The rest of the answer will, I believe, be something like the following. I'll express it by way of one final story:

In 2007 I conducted a series of interviews with twelve of Australia's leading poets. I approached poets with two criteria in mind: they had either published with major national publishers and won major state and national prizes, or they deserved to have done so. What that research revealed was a rigid division of roles – in each and every one of the poets interviewed – between an authorial practice that involved a rush of relatively uncontrolled activity and pleasure, and another practice that involved training an unflinching critical eye upon the words thus produced. This was so much the case that when Alison Croggon commented 'I do sound very schizoid, don't I?' I found

Downloaded by [University of Canberra] at 18:46 26 September 2011

myself automatically replying, 'Most poets do' (2007: 15). That is as much as to say that insofar as my research corroborates Auden's insistence that a poet's first and harshest reader is the poet him or her self (in the guise of the 'Censor'), it also supports that more typical image of the poet: the poet as a creature of the unconscious, the Coleridge who produced 54 lines in a barely-conscious reverie, the poet as conduit for liberated desires.

The support for that image in my interviews was as follows: almost every one of the poets I interviewed described experiences of writing at speeds at which it is literally too fast to think. Kevin Brophy and Alex Skovron went so far as to comment favorably on the steady replacement of pens by keyboards these last decades: touch-typing allows them to keep pace with the speeds at which they at times create (Brophy 2007: 7; Skovron 2007: n.p.). I take these comments to mean that touch-typing helps poets further to remove conscious control from the initial drafting process. I would argue, further, that the reason poets put such reliance upon the radical originality of unconscious and pre-conscious thought processes is to satisfy the very modes of address and authorisation I've analysed above. That is to say, one of the best ways to satisfy the extreme demands for innovation characterising post-Enlightenment aesthetics is via the uniquity of one's own repressed. Jacques Rancière characterises those demands as follows: 'In the aesthetic regime of art', by which he means the entire post-Enlightenment period of Western art into the present, 'art is art to the extent that it is something else than art' (2002: 137). One can detect in this paradoxical formulation an imperative, upon the artist, to realise art through the incorporation of ever new domains of reality. Else it isn't art. I'm suggesting that the poet's characteristic response is to personalise this requirement, by eliciting a form of speech as untrammeled as possible from conscious control. They go to that place where, as Lacan says, *it speaks*. For in truth what I've been referring to as egomania above, is really rather more primal, and alien.

My point, however, is not really that poets satisfy an impossibly rigorous aesthetic command by taking recourse in unconscious processes. To the contrary. It's that those extreme aesthetic demands provide them with the punitive, censorious structure *in which unconscious desire realises itself*.

Correspondence

Any correspondence should be directed to ... Paul Magee, (paul.magee@canberra.edu.au.)

Notes

1. This is my translation of the Russian text. Blake's edition is bilingual. NB the Hayward/Reavey translation it features is far and away the best version of Mayakovsky in English. I rely upon it in all other instances above.
2. This comment on the *Ethics* actually comes from the *Tractatus Politicus*, and is in my translation.

References

Arnold, Mathew. (1961) The Study of Poetry. In Dwight Culler (ed.) *Poetry and Criticism of Mathew Arnold* (pp. 306–326). Boston: Houghton Miflin.

Auden, W.H. (1975) Making, Knowing, Judging. In *The Dyer's hand, and Other Essays* (pp. 31–60). London: Faber.

Downloaded by [University of Canberra] at 18:46 26 September 2011

Auden, W.H. (1976) Alone. In Edward Mendehlson (ed.) *Collected Poems* (p. 312). London: Faber and Faber.

Auden, W.H. (1976) The Managers. In Edward Mendehlson (ed.) *Collected Poems* (p. 604). London: Faber and Faber.

Benveniste, Emile. (1971) Relations of Person in the Verb. In *Problems in General Linguistics*, Mary Elizabeth Meek (trans.) (pp. 195–204). Coral Gables. FL: University of Miami Press.

Berger, John and Anya, Bostock. (2008) Mayakovsky: His Language and his Death. In Michael Almereyeda (ed.) *Night Wraps the Sky, Writings by and about Mayakovsky* (pp. 17–31). New York: Farrar. Straus and Giroux.

Blake, Patricia. (1975) Introduction, The Two Deaths of Vladimir Mayakovsky. In Patricia Blake (ed.) *The Bedbug and Selected Poetry, Max Hayward and George Reavey (trans.)* (pp. 9–50). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Brophy, Kevin. (2007) Interview. Unpublished Typescript.

Cohen, Rachel. (2008) Some Stage Sets for Mayakovsky. In Michael Almereyeda (ed.) *Night Wraps the Sky, Writings by and about Mayakovsky* (pp. 184–197). New York: Farrar. Straus and Giroux.

Croggon, Alison. (2007) Interview. Unpublished Typescript.

Freadman, Anne. (1997) Reflexions on Genre and Gender: The Case of La Princesse de Clèves. *Australian Feminist Studies* 12(26), 305–320.

Friedlander, Ira. (1975) *The Whirling Dervishes*. London: Wildwood House.

Freud, Sigmund. (1984) On Narcissism: An Introduction. In *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis, James Strachey* (trans.) (pp. 59–97). London: Penguin.

Jakobson, Roman. (1985) On a Generation that Squandered its Poets. In Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (eds. with the assistance of Brent Vine) *Verbal Art, Verbal Sign, Verbal Time* (pp. 111–131). Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press.

Jarrell, Randal. (1980) Recent Poetry. In *Kipling, Auden & Co.: Essays and Reviews, 1935–1964* (pp. 221–230). New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Jarrell, Randal. (1980) These are not Psalms. In *Kipling, Auden & Co.: Essays and Reviews, 1935–1964* (pp. 122–126). New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Jarrell, Randal. (1980) The Year in Poetry. In *Kipling, Auden & Co.: Essays and Reviews, 1935–1964* (pp. 242–247). New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Joyce, James. (1976) *Finnegan's Wake*. New York: Penguin.

Kant, Immanuel. (2000) *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (trans.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kassil, Lev. (2008) On the Captain's Bridge. In Michael Almereyeda (ed.) *Night Wraps the Sky, Writings by and about Mayakovsky* (pp. 10–17). New York: Farrar. Straus and Giroux.

Mayakovsky, Vladimir. (1975) I. In Patricia Blake (ed.) *The Bedbug and Selected Poetry*, Max Hayward and George Reavey (trans.) (pp. 53–60). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Mayakovsky, Vladimir. (1975) A Cloud in Trousers. In Patricia Blake (ed.) *The Bedbug and Selected Poetry*, Max Hayward and George Reavey (trans.) (pp. 61–109). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Mayakovsky, Vladimir. (1975) The Backbone Flute. In Patricia Blake (ed.) *The Bedbug and Selected Poetry*, Max Hayward and George Reavey (trans.) (pp. 111–131). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Mayakovsky, Vladimir. (1972) How are Verses to be Made. In *Maxim Gorky, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Alexei Tolstoy and Konstantin Fedin on The Art and Craft of Writing*, Alex Miller (trans.) (pp. 123–161). Moscow: Progress Press.

Murray, Les. (1990) Poems and Poesies. In *Blocks and Tackles, Articles and Essays 1982 to 1990* (pp. 163–179). North Ryde, N.S.W.: Angus & Robertson.

Murray, Les. (2003) The Quality of Sprawl. In John Leonard (ed.), (ed.) *Seven Centuries of Poetry in English* (Fifth edition) (p. 30). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rancière, Jacques. (2002) The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes. *New Left Review* 14(March–April), 133–151.

Downloaded by [University of Canberra] at 18:46 26 September 2011

von Sivers, Malou. (2000) Reflections on Life, Love and Death with Ingmar Bergman and Erland Josephson. TV4 AB.

Skovron, Alex. (2007) Interview. Unpublished Typescript.

Spinoza, Benedictus de. (1958) The Political Works: the Tractatus Theologico-politicus in Part, and the Tracatatus Politicus in Full, A.G. Wernham (trans.). Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Wimsatt, W.K. and Beardsley, Monroe C. (1954) The Intentional Fallacy. In *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (pp. 3–19). Lexington: University of Kentucky Press.

Downloaded by [University of Canberra] at 18:46 26 September 2011