

Poet Laureate Speech

On the Occasion of the Toronto Book Awards 2009

Thursday Oct 15th - Toronto Reference Library

I want to thank the Mayor, the City Council, the Cultural Services Division of the city, and the cultural committee who bestowed this wonderful honor of Poet Laureate on me. What a lovely thing to arrive in this room with writers, with citizens of the city I only imagined when I began writing poetry earnestly more than three decades ago. Allow me a few elliptical remarks to try to express my sense of the work of literature, poetry, language, in our time and in our city.

Some would ask us what does literature have to do with the public space, some would ask us what does poetry have to do with the life of a city, the life of the world; some would go further and say what does literature have to do with citizenship, what does poetry have to do with citizenship.

These questions have their home in instrumentalist thinking and language that traps us in the narrowest confines of function. In this way of thinking (and language) culture is quaint ethnicity, and art is compartmentalised as entertainment, commodity or trophy. This language separates us from song from music from literature from painting, from dance as means to intellectual growth and social well-being.

In the last several decades instrumentalist language - the language of business, the language of war, the language of consumerism - has crowded the space of citizenship and we have become 'taxpayers' and 'stakeholders' and 'consumers' instead of 'citizens'. And it is true we are taxpayers and stakeholders and consumers but it is much more true that we are citizens.

The much more interesting project, the much more enlightened project, the project in which we become fully ourselves is the project of the citizen.

What the first three titles allow us is narrow self-interest. but what the title of citizen bestows is communal fealty and responsibility. The language of citizenship is a capacious language, it is a language where we engage and elaborate ideas of equality, social justice, social responsibility, social well being. I propose, that it is in this language that literature...poetry may live.

Let me deal briefly with the language of consumerism and its effects on the body politic. The language of consumerism, is a vigilant language, it insinuates itself in every part of our life, it insists on rooting out the human and supplanting it with the avatar called the consumer, it tells us eat this, drink that, wear this, think that. It deploys itself as choice but in fact gives us no choice but to consume, to acquire objects, to give over every part of ourselves, our consciousness to this endeavour. Sometimes when the language of consumerism encounters or comes upon literature, say poetry it says ‘ Ah poetry, how useless, what’s that good for? what’s the cost effectiveness of that ?’ Very sly. In truth it recognises in poetry its very antithesis, it recognises a contender, a rival in the territory of the human. It recognizes that poetry makes another proposition for the meaning of existence. That existence might not mean the chasing of one insatiable desire after another. It might not mean constantly being harassed to have *more* of everything. Or that to be happy is to have millions. A lot of poetry good and bad, thousands of poems in fact, have gone into the simple examination of the beauty a flower, for example. No cost effectiveness to that but believe me there’s a work going on there.... fathoming the chemistry of light and time and colour and substance which make up a flower’s existence and the

relation of that existence to ours and the marvel of both. That is hard and necessary work.

To close let me share two stories with you. The first I learned through the Uruguyan writer Eduardo Galeano. He retells a story about the great African-American writer James Baldwin. When Baldwin was quite young he was walking down the street with a friend who was a painter. They had stopped at a red light when the friend said, "Look!" Baldwin looks and sees nothing but a pool of dirty water. And his friend said again, "No, Look again, really!" And Baldwin looks and sees a spot of oil in the puddle and in the spot of oil he sees the street moving and people moving he sees life around him moving, he sees the world there in the puddle. That is what writers and artists do, they look, they help us see life moving around us. The second story I borrow from the American jazz critic Whitney Balliett. A story he tells about Charlie 'Bird' Parker. One morning the legendary saxophonist Charlie Parker woke up, took a cab to trumpeter Kenny Dorham's house. It was really early in the morning Dorham wasn't awake yet, Charlie Parker knocked on the door woke him up; when he came to the door, Parker cigarette in his mouth, asked Dorham for a light and then went on his way. That's what art does too, play and startle. Wakes you up early in the morning, asks you for a light, and goes on its way.

Why do we celebrate writing today, here, why do we celebrate, as manifest in these shortlisted works, the restorative and regenerative, playful and serious aspects of language, at all, in the midst of the world we live in. Because it opens the heart to things we may not have felt, it opens the intellect to things we may not have thought, insights we may not have

gathered. Literature, art, is the extension of thinking itself; the elaborations of possible selves, the propositions for new selves. This city of all cities is deeply conscious of the propositions and possibilities of new selves. As writers we work at elaborating the human and that is always cause for celebration. I congratulate the writers here this evening for doing just that - for helping us to see our city and the world.