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### **"We must answer for what we see": Exploring the Difficulty of Witness in the Poetry of Philip Levine, Yusef Komunyakaa, and Robert Pinsky**

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Senior Thesis

“We must answer for what we see”: Exploring the Difficulty of Witness in the Poetry  
of Philip Levine, Yusef Komunyakaa, and Robert Pinsky

submitted by

Julia Callahan 2016

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for  
the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

2016

Director: Ciaran Berry

Reader: Alice Henton

Reader: Clare Rossini

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## **Acknowledgements**

Thank you to the Trinity College English Department for four years of inspiration, wisdom, and fun. My deep desires to learn and challenge myself are products of your wonderful, engaging faculty. In particular, thank you to my readers, Professor Clare Rossini and Professor Alice Henton.

Thank you to Professor Ciaran Berry for advising this project, being there every step of the way, and pushing me to think and write to the best of my ability.

Thank you to Professor Sarah Bilston for overseeing the thesis colloquium, having endless faith in the other writers and me, and giving us the extra push when we needed it.

Thank you to my thesis colloquium members, Madeleine Kim, Madeline Burns, Bridget Reilly, Forrest Robinette, Michaela Powers, and Jen Sager, for being the support group that I needed. Your endless humor, encouragement, and feedback made this process possible and exciting.

## Introduction

In the introduction to his biography *Early Auden* (1981), Edward Mendelson illustrates the tension between the civil and the vatic, two distinct poetic impulses that have existed throughout literary history. Poets who write in the civil sphere feel an obligation to speak to the public, while those who write in the vatic tradition concern themselves with private matters and emotions. Mendelson employs the story of Aristophanes' *The Frogs* to illustrate the long-standing contest between the two poetic traditions. In *The Frogs*, Dionysus descends into the underworld in search of a poet to save the city of Athens from disaster. Dionysus judges the work of Aeschylus, a poet of civil responsibility, against that of Euripides, a poet of private, inner vision. Dionysus becomes the first critic to judge between the two traditions. Aeschylus appeals to the idea of the poet as a moral teacher, while Euripides favors his own "tongue and senses," and claims that his inward thought brings no harm to society (Mendelson xvi). Although Dionysus loves both poets, he chooses Aeschylus, poet of civil responsibility, to guide Athens.

Mendelson explains that the difference between civil and vatic impulses affects the intended audience of a work. In the *Odyssey*, Homer presents the poets Phemius and Demodocus as devoted to their art, but even more devoted to their audiences. They create their songs with their audiences in mind. According to Mendelson, Homer and the poets in his work are "all poets who write as citizens, whose purpose is to entertain and instruct, and who choose subjects that would interest an audience even if a poet were not there to transform them into art" (Mendelson xv). Their work expresses a desire to speak to someone outside their own mind, and to do so for a civil purpose. Conversely, Mendelson

notes that in the *Iliad*, Achilles is the only person who recites poetry, and he does so in private, singing for himself, and feeling no sense of responsibility to anyone else. While the former poets demonstrate poetic impulses fulfilling a civil responsibility, the latter tends toward vatic impulses, or a desire to write on private matters and feelings, suspecting the notion that poetry can perform a more generalized, civil function.

Mendelson cites the main shift in poetry towards the vatic as occurring in the late eighteenth century with the move into romanticism. In the eighteenth century, romantic poets upended the traditional poetic hierarchy that positioned epic and dramatic poetry, both civil forms, above lyric poetry. Romanticism praised the personal voice and the expression of feelings to solve an internal conflict. While epic poems conveyed allegories of civil obligation, such as a hero fighting to save his city, lyric poems presented the inner struggle of an ordinary person, usually in a much smaller field of action. Following romanticism, modernist poets brought the vatic tradition into the twentieth century by using the lyric style to examine historical events that disrupted society and left them feeling “disfranchised from a historical past” (Mendelson xvii). In explaining the vatic sphere, Mendelson cites modernist poets Eliot and Pound who, as a result of the fractures of history, wrote poems for themselves, finding themselves “at home only in their art” (Mendelson xvi). Although they discussed historical events, romantic poets still employed the vatic tradition because they explained the impact of history on the individual.

The critical conversation surrounding this topic shows that the debate between civil and vatic traditions continues today, though most poetry continues to lean towards the vatic. While many critics acknowledge that poets feel an anxiety towards responsibility, a desire to address political issues and provide important evidence of events that all too

often are overlooked in poetry, some argue that addressing such events does not always follow the creative process of poetry. In his book chapter “The Redress of Poetry” (1995), Seamus Heaney emphasizes the difficulty of writing about public subjects, while still needing to make art: “the will must not usurp the work of the imagination” (Heaney 5). However, Heaney also emphasizes the usefulness of civil poetry when he argues that poetry is “understandably pressed” to give voice to that which has been denied expression in political and social realms (Heaney 5). Heaney therefore illustrates that the tension between civil and vatic impulses continues to be problematic in poetry.

Whereas Mendelson sees the two forms of poetry as exclusive, Carolyn Forché sees a way in which they can coexist. Forché identifies the need for a term to describe the realm that intertwines the civil and vatic, or personal and political, in poetry. A poet herself, Forché acknowledges the responsibility that poets feel to engage with civil issues. In the 1993 article “Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness: A Column,” she describes her own struggle in trying to write about political events in El Salvador and feeling restricted by the boundaries of acceptable poetic subject matter: “My new work seemed controversial to my American contemporaries, who argued against its ‘subject matter,’ or against the right of a North American to contemplate such issues in her work, or against any mixing of what they saw as the mutually exclusive realms of the personal and the political” (Forché 9). Critics felt Forché’s civil work was controversial because it violated solipsism, the current trend of poetry. The resistance to political poetry that Forché experienced illustrates the continued emphasis on the vatic tradition because of the belief that the poet cannot know anything other than herself, leading to the inability to write political, or civil, poetry. This resistance left Forché trapped in her thoughts with no platform to express them. Forché therefore

presents poetry of witness as a means to tackle the responsibility felt by poets to address the events happening in the world around them.

Citing examples from *Against Forgetting* (1993), a collection of poems by poets, including Miklós Radnóti, Paul Celan, and Federico García Lorca, who endured social and historical extremity during the twentieth century, Forché attempts to understand the effects of “extremity on the poetic imagination” (Forché 9). For Forché, poetry of witness allows the poet to speak about subjects that are not exclusively political or personal:

In thinking about these poems [of witness], I realized that the arguments about poetry and politics had been too narrowly defined. Regardless of “subject matter,” these poems bear the trace of extremity within them, and they are, as such, evidence of what occurred. They are also poems that are as much “about” language as are poems that have no subject other than language itself. (Forché 9)

Poetry of witness is two-fold; it is a testament to events that have happened and an examination of the language used to represent them. By “bearing the trace of extremity,” these poems blur the line between personal and political to provide a record of what has occurred and examine its effects. However, they also focus on language due to the difficulty of writing about traumatic events. Forché argues that poetry of witness adopts a transformation or translation of language to remind the public of the atrocities that we have tried to forget. Forché cites Celan’s poem “Todesfuge” as an example of this kind of translation. The poem, originally written in German, cannot be translated into an “accessible English” (Forché 10). Forché believes that to understand Celan, “we might have to translate English into him, that is denature our language just as he denatured German”



(Forché 10). The feeling of the atrocity is thus bound into the language. It is difficult, almost impossible, to translate Celan's poem into a language we can understand, just as it is problematic to transform the experience of atrocity into a poem. Forché extends this act of translation further to represent another aspect of poetry of witness: placing one's mark of judgment on the event. Forché asserts, "Perhaps all of the poems in *Against Forgetting*—even those written in English—are attempts at such translation, an attempt to mark, to change, to impress, but never to leave things as they are" (Forché 10). Although a poet cannot change what has occurred, he can provide evidence of what has occurred, or of what is wrong, to call out this injustice in hopes of reminding the public that it has occurred and preventing it from occurring again.

In fighting against forgetting, a poet takes on a task different from that of the media or other news sources. Poetry of witness requires that the poet speak about what has occurred because, as Forché asserts, a poem may be the only trace of an event. For example, Radnóti's final notebook entry details the death of his friend Miklós Lorsi, and remains the only trace of his death. The poem serves as evidence of the event and cannot be judged against other records to determine its objectivity. Therefore, the poem cannot be judged by its accuracy to real life, but rather must be judged, as Forché argues, "by its consequences" (Forché 9). In light of Forché's argument about the use of witness to break through the defense mechanism of forgetting, "consequences" here is understood as the effect of the poem on the audience. If the poem can force the reader to remember or encounter an event, the poet has given the event life through language. The poem has become a trace, a piece of evidence, of what has occurred and what will not be forgotten.

Although the poet must provide evidence of what has occurred, Forché claims that poetry of witness also “often resorts to paradox and difficult equivocation...in order to bring forth the real” (Forché 14). But if the poet must “defy common sense to speak about the common,” then there must be a factor that makes witness so difficult. According to Forché, the problem with witness is that the poet faces an ethical dilemma in writing about a common experience: “even if one has witnessed atrocity, one cannot necessarily speak *about* it, let alone *for* it” (Forché 12). The poet must find a way to reconcile the desire to tell an important story with the difficulty of expressing atrocities through a common language. Often, Forché argues, poets employ direct address as a “conscientious communality,” a way to speak for and engage with more than one person (Forché 11). This mode of expression is intimate, yet also intensely public, and therefore intertwines the personal and the political realms just as witness intends to do. Forché defends the poet’s ability to bear witness by explaining that poetry of witness can take on many forms, from direct address to fragmentation to irony, to express itself. By creating a new space in between the personal and political realms, witness bridges the gap between the individual and the universal, between man and society, and allows the poet to find language that is suitable to the time and to the trauma. Therefore, although witness is problematic for the poet, the necessity of it trumps the difficulty of it.

Seamus Heaney complicates Forché’s defense of witness by expressing the need to find a balance between public and private, or civil and vatic desires in poetry, stating, “poetry cannot afford to lose its fundamentally self-delighting inventiveness, its joy in being a process of language as well as a representation of things in the world” (Heaney 5). While poetry must speak to the times, the poet’s drive to address issues must not overpower the

imaginative process that makes the poem. According to Heaney, the danger in writing political poetry is that the poem often becomes less about language, the driving force behind all poems. Heaney agrees that poetry seeks to address issues that are wrong in society, but he warns against writing too useful or too practical a response. If poets provide too practical a response, they risk becoming witnesses for the state—writing what Joseph Brodsky calls propaganda<sup>1</sup>—and, in turn, losing their creative freedom by fulfilling solely a civil obligation. Heaney therefore argues for a “fully realized poetry,” where “the coordinates of the imagined thing correspond to and allow us to contemplate the complex burden of our own experience” (Heaney 10). In writing this form of poetry, poets provide an “imagined response” to the conditions of society, which therefore enables them to speak to the public without becoming a pawn of the state or disregarding poetry’s creative process. Heaney cites George Herbert’s poem “The Collar” as an example of “fully realized poetry” because of its plethora of formal elements and its “applicability beyond its own vivid occasion” (Heaney 13). According to Heaney, Herbert’s poem “could be read at certain historical moments as a way of comprehending ironies and reversals more extensive than the personal crisis which it records” (Heaney 13). While still a form of art, the poem connects “very definitely to our existence as citizens of society” (Heaney 13). Herbert’s poem speaks to the public, but, through its integral use of formal elements, does not forego language as a subject. Therefore, Herbert achieves the desired balance between the imaginative force of poetry and the need to address the public. By arguing for this balance in poetry, Heaney identifies the major problem that poets face in responding to the call of

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<sup>1</sup> In his “Nobel Lecture” (1987), Brodsky discusses the need to find a balance between responding to issues of the state and veering into the territory of propaganda.

poetic responsibility: how to use a subjective art form like poetry to provide an objective reality.

Like Heaney, Mark Doty questions the poet's ability to accurately represent the issue at hand, particularly when that issue is catastrophic on a large scale. Speaking to the difficulty of writing poetry after 9/11 in his article "Can Poetry Console a Grieving Public?" (2006), Doty claims that the poet faces the problem of representing the unforgettable, but unspeakable, images and facts of what occurred. Like Heaney, Doty argues that witness is difficult to accomplish because the poet must find the balance between the will to write political poetry and the need to make art: "To name it is to diminish it and, in the process, to come head to head with the inadequacy of the tools of poetry to circumscribe such experience" (Doty 2). It is not enough for the poet to feel a need to write about a political topic; he must internalize it, fully comprehending the situation that has occurred, the complexity of grief, its effect on the human being, and then give it a life in language—a nearly impossible task. Doty explains that this task is impossible for those who respond too definitively or too readily, conveying that loss is understandable, or that poetry is all-powerful.

However, Doty argues, when the poet considers not simply the issue, but also the poet's own problem in representing said issue, a poem driven by witness can succeed. Doty references Wislawa Szymborska's poem "Photograph from September 11<sup>th</sup>" and praises its "admission that the poet has very little power" (Doty 2). The speaker of the poem sees a photograph of people jumping from the World Trade Center on September 11<sup>th</sup> and describes the sight:

They jumped from the burning floors—

one, two, a few more,  
higher, lower.

The photograph halted them in life,  
and now keeps them

above the earth toward the earth. (Szyborska, qtd. by Doty 1)

By describing the horrific sight, the poet acts as a witness. However, Doty argues that Szyborska goes a step further by refusing to complete the poem—"I can do only two things for them/describe this flight/and not add a last line"—therefore saving the dying from facing their inevitable fate, and conveying the poet's inability to speak completely of the unspeakable, but intention to try (Szyborska, qtd. by Doty 1). Szyborska, like Forché, works with elements of the civil and vatic. She experiences 9/11 through a photograph, not through personal experience, but feels a duty to address it in her poetry. By engaging with the photograph so deeply that she can imagine keys and coins falling from the pockets of those who jumped, Szyborska places herself in the situation, but simultaneously steps back enough to recognize that she was not part of the situation and cannot fully speak for those who were. By presenting herself as a human trying to grapple with disaster and grief, rather than a poet holding all the answers, Szyborska levels herself with her readers, respects their pain, and accepts poetry's limits. For Doty, this recognition and respect of the experiences of others is how witness succeeds.

Robert Pinsky, like Heaney and Doty, sees the need for the poet to find a balance between the desire to respond to the public and the danger of forcing this response at the expense of creative freedom. In his essay "Responsibilities of the Poet" (1987), Pinsky

attempts to identify the social responsibility of poets—what they are answerable for—and explain how poets can fulfill such an obligation. Pinsky asserts that the poet's social responsibility stems from the responsibility of all humans: the need to take care of one another, and more so, the need to take care of the dead, who took care of us, and the unborn, whom we will take care of next. According to Pinsky, poets must “feel ready to answer, as if asked by the dead if we have handed on what they gave us, or asked by the unborn what we have for them” (Pinsky 424). In this way, Pinsky sees poetry as generational; that which poets make today will be influenced by those who have gone before them, and will be carried on to teach those who come after they are gone. In order to maintain this relationship between generations, Pinsky argues that poets must feel a desire to respond to this civil call, but must also have the freedom to answer it in their own way. Pinsky believes “tailoring one's work to an audience any less hungry for one's art than oneself probably makes for bad movies and bad poems” (Pinsky 422). Without a sense of creative freedom, a poet writes solely for an unwilling audience and risks losing himself and his voice.

Pinsky presents a solution for this difficulty: poets must transform the subjects they write about before they can write about them, therefore changing the way poetry is thought of and seen. Pinsky urges poets to reject the culturally defined outlines of poetry, stating,

There is a dialectic between the poet and his culture: the culture presents us with poetry, and with implicit definitions of what materials and means are poetic. The answer we must promise to give is “no.” Real works revise the received idea of what poetry is; by mysterious cultural means the revisions

are assimilated and then presented as the next definition to be resisted, violated, and renewed. What poets must answer for is the unpoetic. And before we can identify it, or witness it, an act of judgment is necessary.

(Pinsky 426)

In order to witness something, the poet must look away from what society has instructed him to see as poetry. The question, then, is not only what the poet is answerable for, but also how he can provide that answer. Poets transform typically unpoetic subjects through language to leave a mark of judgment and provide an “inward understanding” of the times (Pinsky 427). Through such a transformation, civil subjects become an acceptable part of poetry and allow the poet to speak to the present day.

Pinsky asserts that a poetry of witness informs the reader about a specific time or society, and thus preserves art for future generations and enables them to learn from the past. Because of its personal nature, poetry provides an understanding of the times that is deeper than that which newspapers and other informative sources can offer. Pinsky cites Blake’s poem “London,” in which the poet establishes a sense of a social whole by repeating “every” in each stanza. Pinsky argues that the poem unifies the society at the time of its publication by emphasizing that everyone is addressed and is part of the same experience.

According to Pinsky, the poem also reminds poets of the necessity to be “witnesses for the future” by using the phrase “but most” to broaden its audience and propel its message forward into the minds of future generations (Pinsky 427; Blake 13). Blake’s poem suggests that the social corruption and pain present in London will continue into the future. Therefore, according to Pinsky, poets must record evidence as a means of continuing the art of poetry and serving future generations. Pinsky argues that “we are

supposed to mark the evidence, as well as continue the art” because those who want to know about certain historical periods, such as London in Blake’s time, will read the poetry of the time (Pinsky 427). Pinsky believes that Blake accomplishes this goal by transforming the city of London imaginatively, putting his personal mark of judgment on it, but also by using rhetoric to transform the city into a nightmarish society, an example of the unpoetic. Therefore, Blake’s poem represents the balance between civil and vatic, between the desire to respond and the necessity to create the poem on the poet’s own terms.

My thesis will consider the poetry of Robert Pinsky, Philip Levine, and Yusef Komunyakaa by looking at their work in the terms of civil and vatic poetic impulses and the need to bear witness through poetry. In my first chapter I will argue that Levine and Komunyakaa bear witness by striking balances between vatic and civil impulses in their poetry. I will argue that by writing about their own life events in their collections *What Work Is* (1991) and *Dien Cai Dau* (1988), Levine and Komunyakaa leave their personal marks of judgment on the times so as to be witnesses for future generations.

Levine and Komunyakaa find a balance between the vatic and civil impulses in their poetry by using personal experiences to discuss larger cultural issues. Through his collection *What Work Is*, Levine turns his personal experience as a factory worker into an example about the harsh conditions of this lifestyle and the need to address social classism. Similarly, in *Dien Cai Dau* Komunyakaa uses his experience as a journalist in the Vietnam War to grapple with issues of racial inequality in the United States. In my chapter I will show how Levine and Komunyakaa’s work in these collections echoes many of the arguments made by critics cited above. For example, Levine and Komunyakaa engage with



Heaney's idea of "fully realized poetry" because they use vatic impulses to speak about civil ones, therefore providing a response to the public without losing sight of the process of creating poetry. They also demonstrate many of Forché's claims, such as using their poems as evidence of events that have occurred and employing certain poetic techniques to speak for people other than themselves.

In my second chapter I will argue that Pinsky bears witness in his poetry by engaging directly with civil poetry as a form of cultural criticism. By analyzing his collection *Gulf Music* (2007), I will explore Pinsky's depiction of witness as a means to responsibility, specifically how his use of symbolic language expresses his desire for poetry to reclaim language from the news, media, and political jingoists. The poetry in Pinsky's collection *Gulf Music* resonates with Forché's investigation of the effects of extremity on the poetic imagination. Pinsky examines the ability of language to represent extreme situations and tragedies, and in *Gulf Music*, written in response to 9/11, he plays with the transformation of language that he and Forché feel is necessary for civil poetry. Pinsky also expresses a concern for the consequences of his work; many poems in *Gulf Music* serve as traces, or evidence, of events that occurred and that Pinsky forces his readers to encounter. In his poetry, Pinsky addresses the impersonal, or common, political and social issues to confront the responsibility he feels as a poet and citizen.

**Chapter I**  
**“The real interrogator is a voice within”: Vatic Impulses and Civil Obligations in the Poetry of Philip Levine and Yusef Komunyakaa**

*What Work Is* by Philip Levine is, on a superficial level, about the poet's life and work in factories in Detroit in the middle of the twentieth century. On a deeper level, however, the poems in *What Work Is* become a testament to mid-twentieth century American life by illuminating issues of race and class that lie beneath conventional American ideals. In this collection, Levine recreates many of his personal memories from his time living and working in Detroit, but expands them into experiences with which the public can engage. Levine therefore mediates between two desires that Mendelson identifies as the civil and vatic impulses of poetry. When asked by Mona Simpson where he thinks contemporary American poetry has gone wrong, Levine praises the “amazingly lively, diversified, and yet united bunch” of poets in the 1960s who were trying to “combine the ‘holiness of the heart’s affections’ with their sense of moral indignation, to stand for what was best in the American soul and against what was the most corrupting and disgusting” (Simpson). He adds that, “They saw their poetry coming out of both their private experiences and visions and their sense of citizenship, to use an old-fashioned word,” and suggests that when poets stopped believing in this two-sided vatic and civil duty of their work is when American poetry lost itself (Simpson). Levine follows the instructions for successful American poetry that he outlines in this interview. He follows the civil tradition outlined by Mendelson because he “chooses his words with his listeners in mind” and his “art responds to a specific social occasion,” but, he also “sings for himself alone” and arguably “finds himself at home only in his art,” like those who engage with

vatic impulses (Mendelson xv). At the time of Levine's writing, a time when contemporary American poetry tended towards the vatic or the insular, Levine set himself apart by using his vatic impulses to achieve something distinct: the fulfillment of a civil responsibility. The poems in *What Work Is* embody the fulfillment of a civil obligation through the expression of private matters, and thus serve as Levine's act of bearing witness through poetry.

In the collection's title poem, Levine bears witness to the adversity that the working class faces by drawing a distinct line between the members of the working class and those of higher social classes. The use of inclusive and exclusive pronouns, "we" and "you," juxtaposes the unification of the members of the working class with the outside perspective of the reader. The poem begins by unifying the members of the working class through the use of the pronoun "we" to describe them:

We stand in the rain in a long line  
waiting at Ford Highland Park. For work.  
  
You know what work is—if you're  
old enough to read this you know what  
work is, although you may not do it. (Levine 18.1-5)

The speaker of the poem and the workers are already cast as struggling; they are in the rain, without protection against the elements, and it is clear that they have been, and will continue to be, waiting for a long time. The speaker contrasts the struggle of the workers with the elevated position of the members of other social classes by using a direct address to set the reader apart from the united subjects of the poem. The workers wait for work, the defining action of their life, while the reader is told, "You know what work is," but "you may not do it" (Levine 18.3-5). This directness draws the reader into the poem while

simultaneously forcing him outside of the bond between those who labor. The workers exist as a group while the reader is solitary. I have chosen to represent the reader as male because Levine is discussing systems of power that are created and enforced specifically by white males. Because of the tone of the poem and the direct engagement of the reader, I argue that Levine is imagining and speaking to a male reader. It is clear that the addressee does not belong to the same class as the people in the poem because they are waiting for work and, if he works at all, he does not work—and subsequently suffer—like they do.

Levine forces the reader to encounter a life that he does not know. Although the poem begins with the workers, the first line is the only place where “we” appears. The rest of the poem uses “you.” However, the speaker emphasizes that the poem is not about the life of the middle class reader, but instead about work, about the lifestyle of the worker, when he says, “Forget you. This is about waiting” (Levine 18.6). The speaker is instructing the reader to step outside of his middle or upper class identity and into the life of the laborers in the poem. Levine wants the reader to read the poem and not be able to identify with the people described in the poem, people who are unlike him and people about whom he is not accustomed to reading. In an interview with Wen Stephenson, Levine reveals his “sense that the reader is so often a suburban person,” and that “these are the hardest people to get to—they’re deeply protected, they’ve survived in the zoo of New York, and they’re not going to let a goddamn poem upset their equanimity” (Levine, *So Ask* 132). In this sense, Levine has to break down the reader’s resistance to experiencing the subject matter of the poems because the poems often critique systems that the middle class reader belongs to. In order to “catch readers off balance,” Levine speaks to them directly because when “you’re going to say something difficult or hard about the nature of our experience,

the reader will resist, and so you have to involve the reader shrewdly” (Levine, *So Ask* 132). Levine cites Auden as his inspiration for this tactic, arguing that what Auden did, and what Levine hopes to achieve, was “entangling [the reader] in the cloth of the poem, sort of confusing us, trying as best as he could to make us spin out of it in some way and see the truth” (Levine, *So Ask* 132-133). Therefore when Levine, like Auden, speaks directly to the reader in the poem, he forces him to confront a reality or truth that he would otherwise turn away from.

Levine’s use of the second person pronoun to create the scene of a poem—and recreate the life he experienced—resonates with Forché’s claim that poets who write of witness often employ direct address as “an attempt to speak for more than one and to engage all others” (Forché 11). Direct address expresses private, intimate feelings, but also crosses into the public sphere with its ability to pull any reader into the scene and language of the poem. In “What Work Is,” Levine writes about a personal experience, but through the use of “you,” he extends his work to engage with other members of the working class and with the reader who, through reading the poem, finds himself uncomfortably put among the people described in it. This formal decision also establishes a balance between the civil and vatic spheres by creating a public experience that corresponds to a personal one. The poem details an actual event, presumably an event that Levine himself experienced and felt deeply, but by turning the reader into the subject of the poem, Levine transforms the experience into one that someone other than himself can experience. In Levine’s poem, once the speaker has pulled the reader into the poem, he tells that reader what he would be doing if he lived the life of the people waiting in the rain. By intertwining these spheres in

the form and content of “What Work Is,” Levine achieves one of Forché’s main goals of poetry of witness: to create a space that mediates the civil and vatic impulses of poetry.

Levine’s poems about factory work use examples from Levine’s life to comment on larger social issues such as race and class. By writing about members of the working class and exploring a lifestyle that is underrepresented in poetry, Levine creates a poetry of inclusion that echoes Whitman’s celebration of people from all social classes in section 19 of “Song of Myself”:

I will not have a single person slighted or left away,  
The kept-woman, sponger, thief, are hereby invited,  
The heavy-lipp'd slave is invited, the venerealee is invited;  
There shall be no difference between them and the rest. (Whitman, qtd. by Simpson)

Ulysses Wardlaw, a classmate of Levine’s, encouraged him to read Whitman; as Levine recalls, he urged “me to get into the big American thing, the thing that was so much more about our actual lives” (Simpson). Levine heard a reading of “Song of Myself” and remembers being impressed by how “It is so eloquent, it is so passionate, it is so up there and at the same time so totally in touch with what is down here,” a quality that he was working on achieving in his own poetry (Simpson). Many critics have noted the connection between the poets because of the portraits of work and workers, but as Paula Finn points out in “Philip Levine, Bard of the Industrial Heartland” (2004), “although Levine’s poems take up the traditional work depicted in the labor movements iconography, unlike that imagery, it is peopled by black workers, and often by women” (Finn 131). However, she astutely asserts, “Unlike most white poets, Levine writes black people into his poems not as

vehicles for a discussion of race, although Levine isn't shy about taking up that subject, but rather because they inhabit his world" (Finn 131). Levine writes about the people with whom he worked, interacted, and bonded because they constituted a large part of his daily life, the part of his life that defined the person he became. Levine tells Simpson, "One of the aspects of my own poetry I like best is the presence of people who don't seem to make it into other people's poems. Much of our recent poetry seems totally without people. Except for the speaker, no one is there" (Simpson). Levine fills his poems with people who he saw every day, characters who complete the tales of his life. Kate Daniels expands this idea in her 2007 article "About Philip Levine" by acknowledging that although Levine continues Whitman's subject, his poetry offers "a more realistic understanding of the hidden aspects of working life, the power of the unconscious, and the enormity of the historical, social, and economic forces stacking the deck against ordinary citizens" (Daniels 194). Discussing these systems of power supports Levine's commentary on race and class. Through his poems and personal examples, Levine comments on the meaning of class, how it intersects with race, and how class defines and shapes one's life. In the poem "What Work Is," the meaning of work is revealed through what work is not: loving your brother, listening to Wagner, smiling. Levine defines work to illustrate the meaning of class and its effect on life. By extending his examination of laborers in 1940-50s Detroit to a discussion of class and race, Levine allows his collection to become something that touches us all.

The poem "Coming Close" tackles similar ideas as Levine nudges the white-collar worker from his position of ignorance and distance to step into the world of factory work for a day:

Take this quiet woman, she has been

standing before a polishing wheel  
 for over three hours, and she lacks  
 twenty minutes before she can take  
 a lunch break. Is she a woman? (Levine 5.1-5)

He pushes the reader to answer this question, to “consider the arms as they press/the long brass tube against the buffer,” to “consider the fine dusting of dark down/above the upper lip,” as if these physical characteristics could determine if this woman is in fact a woman because of the dehumanizing nature of the work (Levine 5.6-7, 10-11). Levine then challenges the reader even further in the sixteenth line as “No! No!” sharply splits the line and carries the double meaning of the motion of a child and the refusal that these observations can determine her humanity. Here Levine successfully “catches the reader off balance,” by addressing him directly, saying,

You must come closer  
 to find out, you must hang your tie  
 and jacket in one of the lockers  
 in favor of a black smock... (Levine 5.16-17)

To know this woman, the reader must shed his preconceived notions about the life of a factory worker and the people who take on these jobs. To know her, he must relinquish his safe distance and position of authority; he must leave behind his jacket and tie, symbolic of his social capital, and enter into her world. In this poem, and in many others throughout the collection, Levine openly draws lines between the reader and the subject, between working class and middle and upper class, and dares the public to examine their sense of class privilege, a topic that Americans rarely discuss.



Levine's poems give voice to his coworkers, expressing their anger and frustration with a society in which they are silenced. The authority of the employer in "What Work Is" to turn away a laborer "for any reason he wants," pits the classes against one another and illustrates the power of work over the members of the working class (Levine 18.20-22). The workers must accept the arbitrary decisions of the employer and become pieces of the machines in the factories if they are lucky enough to be hired by the man who can turn them away for any reason he wants. Daniels supplements this idea, saying that "the primary energies of [Levine's] poems reside in the psychological worlds of people being acted upon by forces greater than themselves" (Daniels 196-197). The subjects of Levine's poems have no choice in their fates, but are instead parts of an assembly line, cogs of the machine controlled by members of the higher classes.

The anger that so often inhabits the lines of Levine's poems illustrates the frustration that the poet feels at the absence of working class people in poetry and his desire to give them a public voice. The anger and hostility characterizing the speaker's tone in "What Work Is" come through as "Forget you," a full sentence that chops the sixth line in half, forces the reader to stop short with the curtness of the phrase. The speaker demands that the reader stop thinking about himself and consider the life of "waiting," of "shifting from one foot to another," of "feeling the light rain like mist/falling into your hair," of placing his fate into someone else's hands (Levine 18.6-9). The speaker's anger is one of the only, if not the only, form of power that he has. He has no power over this life, but the anger that boils within him and erupts into the poem exists as his way to speak out against the injustices committed against him. As David St. John perceptively argues in his 1986 article "Where the Angels Come Toward Us: The Poetry of Philip Levine,"

It is an especially clarifying anger that we find at work throughout Levine's poetry, an anger that grants us the perspective of the real, and not a literary, world. It is an anger that we experience as a relief, the same relief we feel when the lens of a movie projector finally comes into focus; it is the clarity of truth that provides our sense of relief. No other poet so clearly acknowledges the place and necessity of anger—in our lives and in our country—and it gives Levine's poetry an energy and unkempt integrity that is unique. (St. John 181)

By giving the speaker this anger, Levine conveys the civil function of the anger in his poetry: to give voice to people who are not wholly given a voice in poetry. The anger present in many of Levine's poems shows how the poet's work also behaves in a vatic way. Through poems such as "What Work Is," Levine expresses deeply-rooted anger and bitterness, resulting in a cathartic outpouring of emotions. The speaker in this poem, and many others in the collection, is a combination of the working man and Levine himself. Levine's work fulfills a deeply personal goal for the poet. It allows him to express his memories and his thoughts on class, yet also solves his problem with the lack of working class representation in poetry. By using his collection to amplify the previously silenced cries of the working class, Levine embodies the idea of poetry of witness.

Levine also writes about the people with whom he worked because of the sense of community they formed in their time of hardship, and as a celebration of their resilience. Because of his employment in such brutal conditions, Levine learned the dehumanizing character of work at a very young age. In an interview with Kate Bolick, the poet tells her that in the factories he "felt like what [he] was, a nonentity" (Levine, *So Ask* 100). He

learned lessons about the adult world—such as the fact that “no one trusts anyone’s word” and to keep a job “you have to do what you’re told and pretend you like it”—that he conveys throughout his collection (Levine, *So Ask* 100). Although the harsh factory work and oppression dehumanized Levine and his companions, Levine recalls this time not just as a time of struggle, but also as a time of brotherhood and compassion among coworkers:

When I closed my eyes and looked back into the past, I did not see the blazing color of the forges of nightmare or the torn faces of workers. I didn't hear the deafening ring of metal on metal, or catch under everything the sweet stink of decay...Instead I was myself in the company of men and women of enormous sensitivity, delicacy, consideration. I saw us touching each other emotionally and physically, hands upon shoulders, across backs, faces pressed to faces. We spoke to each other out of the deepest centers of our need, and we listened. In those terrible places designed to rob us of our bodies and our spirits, we sustained each other. (Levine, qtd. by Daniels 197)

Levine and his coworkers fought against the dehumanizing nature of brutal factory work by supporting one another and finding humor in their struggles. Levine celebrates these relationships and triumphs in his poems because, as he says in an interview with Mona Simpson, in Detroit, it’s about more than grand, heroic accomplishments:

Nothing grandly heroic is taking place [in Detroit]...Just the small heroics of getting through the day when the day doesn’t give a shit, getting through the world with as much dignity as you can pull together from the tiny resources left to you...The poem is a tribute to all these people who survived in the face

of so much discouragement. They've survived everything America can dish out. (Simpson)

Survival alone is an accomplishment for the working class members of Detroit. In these harsh conditions, the bond between coworkers calls for celebration because it is a triumph that they were able to do more than survive.

In the poem "Every Blessed Day," Levine conveys this by describing the daily life of a worker and his struggle to maintain his humanity as his occupation tries to rid him of it. Levine does not name the man in the poem, but rather only refers to him as "he," to suggest that he represents all workers and to illustrate the degrading nature of this lifestyle where a man is nameless, faceless, and replaceable. The poem begins with the man taking a sip of water and "gasp[ing]" himself awake (Levine 8.4). His world is bleak, dark, cold, grey, and every day is the same. However, when he imagines "places he/has never seen but heard/about," places that hold "all the shades of red/and blue," he can escape the "prison" that his life has become (Levine 8.13-15, 19-20, 22). The man begins to "live/for these suspended moments," moments where hope of another, more fulfilling life exists (Levine 8.22-23). Although the poem begins with the man trapped in his sad, inescapable life, dreaming of an alternative, it ends with humor and camaraderie. He has a choice to slide his time card into the machine or drop it on the ground and walk away from Chevy Gear & Axle #3—the company where Levine himself worked—but "either way the day will last/forever. So he lets it fall" (Levine 8.45-46). The man may dream about a different life when he's alone at home or on the bus, but when he arrives at work he finds his coworkers and is "laughing among them, older men/and kids. He's saying, 'Damn,/we've got it made'" (Levine 8.51-53). The brotherhood that the man in the poem experiences with his

coworkers is a form of escape from his monotonous working life. Like the daydreaming of places he has never been, the humor the man employs at the end of the poem acts as a means toward survival. He cannot escape this life, so he must find a way to endure it. The friendship that he finds among his coworkers echoes Levine's statement about the way he and his colleagues "sustained each other."

Levine's portraits of working-class Americans provide a testimony of mid-twentieth century life in Detroit, but also become evidence of American life on a more general level with their discussion of race and class. Levine places his mark of judgment on events that occurred in his past and becomes a witness for future generations. He tells Kate Bolick, "Always looking back is part of my nature. The common American notion of 'off with the old, on with the new' has always offended me...the poetry I inherited directed me toward the poetry that wasn't written. The very nature of being a poet, maybe any artist, is never to say, 'Off with the old.' It's to say, 'Let me carry the old into the present and then into the future as best I can'" (Levine, *So Ask* 109). Levine's drive to learn from the poetry that came before him and carry his own art forward echoes Pinsky's generational idea of poetry where the poet must carry on what the dead have given him and give something new to the unborn. Although Levine cannot change the past, he records it for others in hopes that they can change the future. Levine argues for a change in the way that poetry is written and received. He believes American poetry must return to "believing in itself," to believing in its ability to speak vatically and civilly at the same time (Simpson).

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Yusef Komunyakaa is perhaps best known for his poetry concerning the Vietnam War. His collection, *Dien Cai Dau*, sprang from his memories of his time of service as a

journalist in the war. Scholars often compare Komunyakaa to other Vietnam soldier-poets,<sup>2</sup> but I will demonstrate the significance of examining his work in relation to civilian poets, namely Levine and Pinsky, in terms of how he bears witness through his work. Like Philip Levine, Komunyakaa constructs his collection from memories and personal experiences, and uses them as a way into a discussion of larger social and cultural issues. *Dien Cai Dau* serves as a testimony to the events that occurred in Vietnam, and the repercussions that those events had for Komunyakaa himself and Americans, particularly African Americans, as a whole. Like Levine, Komunyakaa also uses his work to speak for a disadvantaged people, with *Dien Cai Dau* allowing him to confront the discomfort he feels over fighting for a country in which he, as a black soldier, is not equal. Because his collection is based on a subjective experience, Komunyakaa explores witness through a deeply personal lens. He uses *Dien Cai Dau* not only as an outlet for the unforgettable memories of Vietnam, but also as a way to question his, and America's, involvement in the war. Komunyakaa bears witness in order to examine the larger effects of his personal struggle in the war and to make a statement about race in America. By recording atrocious events from the past, Komunyakaa's particular form of witness "bears the trace of extremity" (Forché 9).

Komunyakaa's decision to write about social and political topics stems from a desire to break out of the evasive, quiet tradition of American poetry. For Komunyakaa, the "sameness" that he sees in American poetry presents a problem. When asked about the state of poetry in America in a 1990 interview with Vicente Gotera, Komunyakaa says, "There's a sameness about American poetry that I don't think represents the whole people. It represents a poetry of the moment, a poetry of evasion, and I have problems with this. I

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<sup>2</sup> Komunyakaa's placement in 1989 in W. D. Ehrhart's anthology *Unaccustomed Mercy: Soldier-Poets of the Vietnam War* confirmed his place in the canon of Vietnam soldier-poets.

believe poetry has always been political, long before poets had to deal with the page and white space...it's natural" (Goter 225). Komunyakaa sees poetry at the time of this interview as "a poetry of evasion" in that it is apolitical and not socially conscious. He sees a need for more individual voices, for poets who write in different modes or about taboo topics, in the poetic conversation. Komunyakaa adopts Forché's idea of "poetry of witness" by intertwining the personal and political realms in his work. His need to bear witness develops from his need to face his participation in the Vietnam War. In a 1994 interview with Muna Asali, Komunyakaa states, "I had been very lonely in Vietnam...I was very conscious of what I was doing and what was happening to me. Though we were responsible collectively, we were also responsible as individuals. I had to write *Dien Cai Dau* as a witness" (Komunyakaa, *Blue Notes* 77). Komunyakaa's position as a witness exists as a way for him to confess the guilt he feels, and to push his audience to confront and make sense of that guilt. Komunyakaa and Levine share a similar sense of audience as they both envision speaking to white, wealthy males; for Komunyakaa, these men have not experienced war, but they must encounter Komunyakaa's guilt because he wants them to understand the struggle of African Americans in Vietnam as well as at home in America. Komunyakaa was unable to write about his experiences directly after the war, but after holding his feelings in for over a decade, he finally found the language to unleash them. When describing the experience of writing about his service in Vietnam, Komunyakaa recalls:

In the spring of 1984 I found myself writing about my experiences and observations in Vietnam during 1969-70...these poems seemed to have merely gushed out of me, and they surfaced with imagery that dredged up so much unpleasant psychic debris. All the guilt and anger coalesced into a

confused stockpile of unresolved conflict. These poems were prompted by a need; they had fought to get out. I hadn't forgotten a single thread of evidence against myself... (Komunyakaa, *Blue Notes* 14)

As soon as Komunyakaa opened his mind to remembering, these images of Vietnam and the “unpleasant psychic debris” they caused came back to him so quickly that he immediately felt the need to bear witness. He used his renovation of an old New Orleans house to slow down and streamline the process of remembering and writing:

I put a pad of paper and pen on a table in the next room. This had a purpose. The images were coming so fast that, whenever I made a trek down the ladder, each line had to be worth its weight in sweat. That spring and summer I must have discarded thousands of images, ones that just a few months earlier I would've given a thumbs up for. I learned that the body and mind are indeed connected: good writing is physical and mental.

(Komunyakaa, *Blue Notes* 15)

Komunyakaa struggled to face his memories and make sense of the images that came flooding back to him. This battle between internal and external—here, in the form of remembering and writing—appears throughout the poems of *Dien Cai Dau* as we see Komunyakaa dealing with a kind of out-of-body experience as he recreates the scenes of events he experienced and watches himself re-experience Vietnam.

In knitting together the personal and political realms in his poetry, Komunyakaa also mediates between two types of history, public history and private history. The two terms correspond to Mendelson's “civil and vatic” impulses of poetry because they express a tension between external and internal, public and personal. In his article, “Vietnam and



the ‘Voice Within’: Public and Private History in Komunyakaa’s *Dien Cai Dau*” (1995), Kevin Stein states, “In the poetic process, Komunyakaa combines actual history and his own inward response to historical events, then subjects both to the filter of his artistic sensibility. What results is a different kind of history that makes use of external, historical events to produce an inward, aestheticized history flushed with personal values and interpretations” (Stein 543). Stein suggests that Komunyakaa makes art by integrating his memories and responses to events with the facts of the events themselves. By aestheticizing history, Komunyakaa blends the civil and vatic realms and offers testimony through a uniquely personal lens. Komunyakaa’s retrospective, ruminated account of his Vietnam experience exemplifies one way in which he works between these two realms. Komunyakaa published *Dien Cai Dau* fourteen years after he served in the Vietnam War. When speaking to the creation of the poems in *Dien Cai Dau* during that renovation in New Orleans, Komunyakaa recalls that the images came back to him “at such a panic-ridden haste” that he was scared about what he would have to do with the memories (Komunyakaa, *Blue Notes* 14). All the pain and anger from the war that he had been holding inside finally burst out of his head and heart and onto the page over a decade later. Because he kept the memories inside for so long, Komunyakaa had time to reflect on the past events and examine the effect that they have had on his present life and identity. Many of the poems in *Dien Cai Dau* show a concern for the continued effect of past actions on the present or future self.

In the poem “Facing It,” a visit to the Vietnam War Memorial becomes a link between past and present. The wall reminds Komunyakaa of his time of service and shapes his perception of his surrounding stimuli:

Names shimmer on a woman's blouse  
 but when she walks away  
 the names stay on the wall.  
 Brushstrokes flash, a red bird's  
 wings cutting across my stare.  
 The sky. A plane in the sky.  
 A white vet's image floats  
 closer to me, then his pale eyes  
 look through mine. I'm a window.  
 He's lost his right arm  
 inside the stone. (Komunyakaa 63.19-29)

Although "Facing It" is the final poem in *Dien Cai Dau*, it was the first poem of the collection that Komunyakaa wrote. With its play between past and present self, the poem adopts the out-of-body experience that characterizes the way in which Komunyakaa deals with, and conveys, his memories throughout the collection. The poem illustrates Komunyakaa's position in bearing witness and his fears about it. Komunyakaa searches for consolation, or a relief from the guilt he feels because of his service, but he must also deal with the stain that this experience left on his life. One way that Komunyakaa accomplishes this in "Facing It," and throughout the collection, is by intertwining black and white. Throughout the poem, the speaker, Komunyakaa himself, draws comparisons between the black granite memorial, his own black face, and the white of morning light, a booby trap, and a veteran's "pale eyes." Komunyakaa finds himself trapped in the memorial, caught in a constant limbo between black and white: "I turn/this way—the stone lets me go./I turn that way—I'm

inside/The Vietnam Veterans Memorial.” In this poem and others throughout the collection, blackness connects to entrapment, and whiteness to mobility. The images constantly overlap and transform, and the speaker observes that his position in relation to the memorial, and the colors black and white, shift “depending on the light” (Komunyakaa 63.12). The poem is a chaotic compilation of intertwining images that results in a strong, clear statement despite its contradictory nature. By the conclusion of the poem, and the collection, we understand Komunyakaa’s message that past actions and experiences shape the future self; for an African American soldier in Vietnam, these experiences haunt the mind and body so deeply that they not only influence the construction of the future self, but also affect the development of racial identity.

Many scholars have perceptively noted the significance of the collection ending on the soft, endearing moment of a mother brushing her son’s hair: “In the black mirror/a woman’s trying to erase names:/No, she’s brushing a boy’s hair” (Komunyakaa 63.29-31). Stein argues that the image gives the most hopeful, redemptive ending possible: “Her gesture focuses the book’s ending on the future that the young boy embodies, a future outside of the glass-like surface of the Memorial and ahead of the faceless window the speaker has imagined himself to be” (Stein 558). Stein also poignantly asserts that while the rest of the poem displays a pattern of alternating between black and white, in the final image, “the question of whether this mother and son are black or white matters not at all” (Stein 558). Stein’s assertion, while illuminating in its description of hope and redemption, may be too favorable. Although the final image is positive, it still conveys how deeply memories of the war haunt Komunyakaa, and how completely they manipulate his thought process. At the end of a collection that focuses so deeply on black and white, “Facing It”

blurs these lines to illustrate how past perceptions and memories can intertwine and have a profound, lasting effect on the present self and mind. The shifting impressions of black and white in “Facing It” represent the shifting emotions that Komunyakaa feels while experiencing, and writing about, these events, as well as the ambiguity over identity that he faces as a result of such experiences.

While “Facing It” establishes Komunyakaa’s position as a witness at a time when he is looking back on past events, his dramatic poems, where he writes from an assumed voice, illustrate more fully his issues with his position as a witness. In his 1994 interview with Muna Asali, Komunyakaa describes the “battle within the psyche” that many black soldiers faced in Vietnam after Asian soldiers tried to convince them that they were fighting a war for white men (Asali 144). This internal battle occurs in the prose poem “The One-Legged Stool,” where Komunyakaa assumes the voice of an African American prisoner of war. According to Komunyakaa, “The One-Legged Stool” is a “diagram for the rest of the book. [The soldier]’s imprisoned within a paradox. His body is imprisoned in a cell but also in itself as well” (Asali 144). Just as Komunyakaa found himself trapped in the blackness of the Vietnam War memorial, the POW finds himself trapped in his own black body. The POW has been separated from his white comrades, and is subjected to intense psychological warfare as he is forced to balance on a one-legged stool. To maintain his sanity and defend himself from the verbal and psychological abuse of his Vietnamese captors, the soldier rejects everything that his captors tell him:

Don’t you know I’ll never cooperate? No, don’t care what you whisper into  
the darkness of this cage like it came out of my own head, I won’t believe a

word. Lies, lies, lies. You're lying. Those white prisoners didn't say what you say they said. They ain't laughing. Ain't cooperating. They ain't putting me down, calling me names like you say. Lies. Lies. It ain't the way you say it is. I'm American. (Komunyakaa 40)

The Vietnamese soldiers try to break down the black soldier by convincing him to turn against his white companions. As Angela Salas notes in her book *Flashback Through the Heart: The Poetry of Yusef Komunyakaa* (2004), everything the Vietnamese say to the soldier, the type of psychological warfare they use against him, is “tailored to the fact that he is a black soldier” (Salas 73). The soldier withstands this abuse and finds solace in the fact that he’s American; he declares this adamantly to prove to himself that the Vietnamese are lying. His American identity comforts him at a time when he has nothing more than his mind to save him. He praises his American identity when Vietnamese soldiers are pushing him to the edge. With the blurring and shifting of black and white comes an ambiguity or confusion over identity that is embodied by the black POW’s insistence that he is American even though he is not treated as one. The irony of this declaration speaks volumes because the black soldier embraces an American nationality in a way that the United States, stricken by racial inequality and civil unrest, does not embrace him even when he is at home. Salas asserts, “*being* American may be a small comfort to [the POW] if he survives and is repatriated to a country swept by bitter civil unrest” (Salas, *Flashback* 74). The POW’s psychological battle speaks to Komunyakaa’s guilt about his service in Vietnam because both men are forced to question the purpose of their participation in the war and the validity of their American identities. Adopting the voice of the black prisoner of war provides Komunyakaa with an outlet to discuss the conflicting, shifting emotions—guilt,

regret, confusion, anger—that he feels about his participation in the war, and allows him to circumvent his frustration with his position as a witness by speaking through a character instead of through his own voice.

The “stockpile of unresolved conflict” that is Komunyakaa’s war memories manifests itself in the more personal poem “Tu Do Street” in a way that reveals Komunyakaa’s shifting feelings over race, as well as many of the horrifying actions he experiences in Vietnam. “Tu Do Street” illustrates the distance that white and black American soldiers are forced to maintain in their free time, but also the ease with which that divide breaks down when they find a shared humanity in the company of Vietnamese prostitutes. In the poem, Komunyakaa recalls childhood memories of segregation in Bogalusa, Louisiana, as the “White Only” signs from his memory mimic those he sees in a bar in Vietnam (Komunyakaa, *Dien Cai Dau* 29.6). The “mama-san/behind the counter acts as if she/can’t understand” Komunyakaa’s order because he is black, and he finds himself traveling “deeper into alleys” where he can enjoy the company of a prostitute on a non-discriminatory basis (Komunyakaa 29.10-12, 20). According to Alvin Aubert, the title of the poem acts as a play on words for “Two Door Street” to illustrate the nature of the segregation (Aubert, “The Unified Vision” 1). Bars separate the black and white soldiers and force them to find prostitutes in different locations, but once they both find this company, they find a common humanity:

There’s more than a nation  
inside us, as black & white  
soldiers touch the same lovers  
minutes apart, tasting

each other's breath... (Komunyakaa 29.27-31)

The soldiers inadvertently share the same women, women whose "brothers" and the "machine-gun fire" they inspire bring the soldiers together (Komunyakaa 29.16). Though they are separated based on the color of their skin, they are all men with the same desires and needs who find themselves in the company of the same women. Black, white, and yellow intertwine to show the deep interrelatedness of human beings in wartime.

However, Komunyakaa does not present the union between black and white as genuine and sincere, but rather as problematic. In engaging with the same women, the black and white soldiers become equally human, but the fact that they only find this commonality through purchased sex is deeply ironic. Nevertheless, the irony runs deeper than sex. As critics such as Stein and William Baer note, this shared humanity comes at a price; the connection that the black and white soldiers share leads them to the same connection with the "underworld": "...without knowing these rooms/run into each other like tunnels/leading to the underworld" (Komunyakaa 29.32-34). Stein observes that the use of figurative tunnels to link the soldiers harkens back to the "deadly maze of tunnels the Viet Cong use to ferry supplies, to fight and quickly disappear, and into which many American soldiers ventured never to return" (Stein 551). The tunnels that link black and white equally also lead black and white soldiers equally to death. When asked about this poem in a 1998 interview with William Baer, Komunyakaa speaks of the confusing "psychic space of the GI" and the underworlds that soldiers in Vietnam created in their own minds:

There were many symbolic underworlds in Vietnam, the underground tunnel systems, some of the bars, and the whole psychic space of the GI—a kind of underworld populated by ghosts and indefinable images. It was a place of

emotional and psychological flux where one was trying to make sense out of the world and one's place in that world. And there was, relentlessly, a going back and forth between that internal space and external world. It was an effort to deal with oneself, and with the other GIs, the Vietnamese, and even the ghosts that we'd managed to create ourselves. So, for me, this is a very complex picture of the situation of the GI—going back and forth, condemned in a way to trek back and forth between those emotional demarcations while trying to make sense out of things. (Komunyakaa, qtd. by Baer 9)

Komunyakaa's attempt to maintain his sanity in Vietnam reflects his need to write this collection. Komunyakaa tells "Tu Do Street" from the first person perspective, and phrases such as "I close my eyes," "I walk," and "I look" exemplify his position as a witness. Through this flashback-style poem, Komunyakaa records what he has done and suggests that those actions have constructed the person he became. Through the process of remembering these emotions and recording them in his collection, Komunyakaa gives up this psychologically haunted person; he channels his mental turmoil into beautiful, albeit at times disturbing, poems that equalize his inner and outer selves.

Komunyakaa's work responds to Forché's call for a term to "describe the space between the state and the supposedly safe havens of the personal" (Forché 9). The poems in his collection carry the weight of the intense emotional, physical, and psychological personal pain caused by a war that he believes his government fought improperly. For Komunyakaa, "the real interrogator is a voice within"; he must address his experiences in Vietnam, not only to help air and reconsider his mind and conscience, but also to carry his lessons and memories forward as a learning tool for future generations (Komunyakaa



37.19). The poems in *Dien Cai Dau* address the personal shame Komunyakaa feels for taking part in a war plagued by the disgusting actions of abusing Vietnamese civilians and reveling in time spent with Vietnamese prostitutes. In the poem "You and I Are Disappearing," Komunyakaa expresses his guilt over the deaths of Vietnamese civilians, such as the girl he sees "still burning inside [his] head" (Komunyakaa 17.2-3). The poem recounts the brutal death of a Vietnamese woman by napalm and reveals the anguish the speaker feels as this scene plays over and over again in his mind. Komunyakaa stacks on simile after simile to convey the horrifying nature of the woman's death, saying she burns "like a shot glass of vodka...like a field of poppies at the edge of a rainforest...like a burning bush driven by a godawful wind" (Komunyakaa 17.22-28). It is as though simple language will not suffice to represent, or avenge, this woman's death. The mountain of similes creates a panicked, chaotic scene in which neither the narrator nor the reader can escape the overwhelming violence. In her article "Race, Human Empathy, and Negative Capability: The Poetry of Yusef Komunyakaa" (2003), Salas argues that this technique "places the reader apart from, yet witness to, the woman's horrifying death," allowing Komunyakaa to express his own guilt, but also make the woman the central figure of the poem (Salas 39). This technique echoes Levine's use of the direct address to involve his audience in his poems while simultaneously giving a voice to the people about whom he writes. In his struggle with his position as a witness, Komunyakaa works to make sure the reader realizes who is the true victim in his poems and on whom we should focus our attention. The scale and horror of the events about which Komunyakaa is writing make his position of witness all the more difficult. Not only must he subject himself to the painful recollection of these memories, but he also must find fitting words to describe them. In his article "Can

Poetry Console a Grieving Public?” Mark Doty cites a similar example of the struggle of the poet to witness or accurately capture moments of horror and grief. Doty recalls the line from Neruda’s “I Explain Some Things” where the poet states that the blood of the children ran in the street “como el sangre de niños”—“like the blood of children” (Doty 2). In this instance Neruda rejects the simile, and Doty suggests that it is because “there is no adequate gesture, nothing in the arsenals of figuration that will serve; only a terrible plainness of saying, or of pointing toward what cannot be said” (Doty 2). Although they deal with it in opposite ways, Komunyakaa and Neruda both demonstrate the limits of language and witness when they come up against horrific, large-scale events.

Komunyakaa’s inability to represent his experiences in straightforward language illustrates the hesitancy, yet necessity, he feels to act as a witness for the events he saw in Vietnam. The position of witness comes as a challenge for Komunyakaa, but he continues to adopt the role despite the difficulty of it.

Komunyakaa’s use of similes to portray the girl’s death in “You and I are Disappearing” also echoes Heaney’s idea of “fully realized poetry,” or balancing the creative process of poetry with the poet’s desire to speak to the public. Heaney argues that the poet must not lose sight of language, the foundation of poetry, and must provide an “imagined response” to the public instead of one that is too practical and risks becoming propaganda. Heaney’s idea of balance seems to stand in opposition to Doty’s call for plain, direct language, but Komunyakaa finds a way to achieve both. By using a mountain of similes to describe the young woman’s death, Komunyakaa creates a clear message to the public, yet allows his poem to embody the art of poetry by using rhetorical techniques and language to tell the story. The poem, more than any other in the collection, focuses solely on language.

While poems such as “Facing It,” “The One-Legged Stool,” and “Tu Do Street” tell stories, “You and I Are Disappearing” simply describes the haunting memory of a burning, dying girl. Komunyakaa and his fellow soldiers do nothing in the poem except “stand with our hands/hanging at our sides/while she burns” (Komunyakaa 17.10-12). He replaces action with language. The girl burns, Komunyakaa watches, and the language of the similes carries and shapes the poem. Language guides the poem, but does not fail in its ability to create a poem of witness. The final effect of the poem lies not in the ability or inability of language to capture this scene, but rather in Komunyakaa’s ability to balance memory, language, and responsibility. Komunyakaa does not provide an overtly political message or solution to the public, but rather lets the beautiful horror of his poem speak for itself.

Part of Komunyakaa’s feeling of responsibility as a poet is to confront his guilt while making the public aware of their own moral shortcomings. Komunyakaa recreates the scenes of violence that continue to haunt him years after the war and pushes the reader to see the utter cruelty in these actions. In his interview with Asali, Komunyakaa draws a distinction between human and animal violence, showing the tragedy of human violence because “we have the capacity to say yes or no. Conscience and free will. The capacity to reason...We also have the capacity to lie to ourselves, attempting to escape censure or guilt” (Asali 142). In *Dien Cai Dau*, Komunyakaa blurs the line between human and animal, often personifying things in nature or giving animal characteristics to the humans, to further express the horror of the crimes committed in Vietnam. The human and natural worlds intertwine and tangle until they are one and the same; the soldiers “danced with tall grass” and “spiders mend webs we marched into” (Komunyakaa 26.1, 11.4). In “A Greenness Taller than Gods,” Komunyakaa wonders “When will we learn/to move like trees move?”

(Komunyakaa 11.11-12). By stitching together these realms and characteristics, Komunyakaa conveys the all-consuming jungle environment of Vietnam and the dehumanization that he and his fellow soldiers imposed on the civilians and combatants they encountered. Because humans have the ability to know that what they are doing is wrong, the actions Komunyakaa and his soldiers committed against other humans in Vietnam materialize as even more violently catastrophic. Komunyakaa's desire to present his and society's wrongdoings establishes itself in his craft by conveying the violence and absurdity surrounding the events he witnessed. His poems, like Levine's, draw the reader into the experiences presented and force him to see a new kind of life. Yet Komunyakaa's poems in *Dien Cai Dau* also make the reader see, with reflective clarity, the twisted nature of living without questioning the government's decisions or one's own beliefs. Komunyakaa fully integrates Mendelson's civil and vatic realms in his collection because he demonstrates how the personal, expressed through memories, actions, and perspectives, can become a political act.

Yusef Komunyakaa and Philip Levine follow the civil tradition of poetry by writing about public, political issues. However, they complicate the distinction between civil and vatic spheres by using elements of the vatic tradition to engage with their civil impulses. Both Levine and Komunyakaa discuss personal experiences as a way to confront broader cultural issues. For Levine and Komunyakaa, bearing witness means using their positions as public figures to bring awareness to groups of people that are not often given a voice in literature. Levine and Komunyakaa's collections exemplify the responsibility of the poet because they show that bearing witness in poetry to personal events and experiences can

stimulate conversation about broader social issues. By writing about their own life events, Levine and Komunyakaa leave their personal marks of judgment on the times and become witnesses for future generations.

## Chapter II

### **“In the haunted ruin of my consciousness”: Robert Pinsky’s Representation of the Poet’s Responsibility**

In his poetry, Robert Pinsky articulates his own particular sense of responsibility. He sees himself as a public figure with a voice, and resolves to use that voice to address issues of public importance, such as the way we use language to represent memories, and the influence of the media, materialism, and commodification on the image of America that we are creating and leaving behind. Although Pinsky expresses the need to bear witness through his poetry, I place his work in its own chapter because Pinsky’s mode of witness differs markedly from that of Levine and Komunyakaa. While Levine and Komunyakaa use direct, personal experiences to guide their collections, Pinsky addresses the commonly experienced tragedy of September 11<sup>th</sup> and its aftermath in his collection *Gulf Music*. The event holds personal memories for all Americans, but rather than discussing his individual feelings, Pinsky examines the event as part of the collective memory, in terms of its effect on the American people and American culture as a whole. He attempts to cut through the hollow language used by people when discussing September 11<sup>th</sup>, and return meaning to the language we use to address tragedies. Pinsky thus engages with ideas of language, memory, and forgetting in a way that separates his poetry of witness from that of Levine and Komunyakaa.

In his article “Robert Pinsky and the Language of Our Time” (1994), James Longenbach conveys Pinsky’s representation of the poet’s responsibility as a perfect mediation between the civil and vatic realms:

Virtually all of Pinsky's poems are autobiographical, but they recognize that an autobiography, like the self it narrates, is constituted by a wide array of cultural and historical forces. To get to the "heart" of these poems is not to find some essential core but to recognize that the heart is on the surface of everything the poet sees or speaks. Any distinctions between private and public "history" become difficult to sustain. (Longenbach 169)

In this chapter I will illustrate how Pinsky's sense of poetic responsibility manifests itself in his engagement with poetry of witness. Pinsky's focus on language, more specifically the ability of language to accurately capture emotion and tragedy, demonstrates a need to understand the effects of catastrophe on the poetic imagination. The ways in which we use and abuse language, the limits of language, and the co-option of language by the media and larger cultural forces, often for political purposes, complicate the poet's ability to deal with large scale catastrophes. For Pinsky, witness is not inherently connected to personal experience; however, when the personal intersects with the political in a way that allows the poet to fulfill his sense of civil obligation, the poet is able to bear witness by making poems that hold public weight.

In his essay, "Responsibilities of the Poet," Robert Pinsky defines the poet in terms of his social obligations: to be able to answer the questions of the public; to change the way poetry is typically seen and thought of; to be a witness to current life and transform the art of poetry in order for it to continue throughout future generations, from the dead to the unborn (Pinsky 421). According to Pinsky, the poet should not merely succumb to the beauty of language, but instead needs to transform the conventions of poetic subject matter and language to address social issues and continue the art form. Pinsky's sense of poetic

responsibility reflects Forché's "poetry of witness" by breaking social and literary norms to find a space between political and personal poetry in which the untouchable issues of war, terror, and social conflict are not only discussed, but also challenged.

The connection between Pinsky's poetic project and Forché's poetry of witness runs even deeper than finding a space between the political and the personal. Pinsky's preoccupation with language echoes Forché's assertion that "postcards, letters, reports on the news—all these are communal forms, ways of writing that stress the interpersonal aspects of poetry, the public side of literature. They underline the collective urgency that propels a literature of the social" (Forché 12). Pinsky harnesses this "collective urgency" in his poems and uses it to drive his investigations to the public. He uses news reports, popular songs, and other media to explore the use of language around the response to September 11<sup>th</sup>. Out of these materials, Pinsky produces a communal, interpersonal form of poetry to bear witness. Forché advocates for a public, social form of literature and presents witness as the solution: "In an age of atrocity, witness becomes an imperative and a problem: how does one bear witness to suffering and in what court of law?" (Forché 12). She argues that in order to answer this imperative, poets must find and use language that is suitable to both the time and the trauma about which they are writing. How do they do this? They transform characteristically unpoetic language into something that can be used in a poem. Pinsky does exactly that by incorporating lyrics, pop culture references, and historical figures and events in his poems. His struggle with language lies in the exclusionary nature of traditional poetic language, and he seeks to expand that field so that catastrophes such as September 11<sup>th</sup> can be represented in poetry.



In many of the poems throughout *Gulf Music*, Pinsky addresses a concern about the way we use language to capture events and convey memories. In the poem “The Anniversary,” Pinsky identifies the two most obvious responses to September 11<sup>th</sup>—naming the tragedy by its date and rebuilding the World Trade Center into a commemorative site—and illustrates the insignificance of the date itself and the foolishness of trying to encapsulate the horrific nature and indescribable feelings of the event in a single name: “The date became a word, an anniversary/We inscribed with meanings” (Pinsky, *Gulf Music* 19.8-9). The date itself, September 11, 2001, did not have meaning on its own, not until we “inscribed” it with meaning embodied by a sort of sentimental patriotism. Pinsky does not downplay the deep importance of the September 11<sup>th</sup> tragedy in the lives and culture of the American people, but rather he creates a distinction between the tragedy itself and the public response to it. Pinsky fears that naming the tragedy and commemorating the destruction of the World Trade Center has caused Americans to forget the true meaning behind the event and create memorial objects that turn our memories into commodities. Pinsky’s argument here echoes Mark Doty’s idea that “to name [a tragedy] is to diminish it” (Doty 2). By naming the event and using symbols to represent unfathomable feelings and memories, Americans give more value to objects than to emotions. Pinsky imagines what would happen if “they blow up the Statue of Liberty”:

Then the survivors might likely in grief, terror  
 And excess build a dozen more, or produce  
 A catchy song about it, its meaning as beyond  
 Meaning as those old symbols. (Pinsky 21.45-48)

The catchy song and twelve statues speak to Pinsky's idea of the commodification of events, specifically tragic ones; the materialism that consumes Americans has led us to believe that remembering an event for ourselves, in our own minds, is not enough. We believe that we must publicly commemorate September 11<sup>th</sup> and other tragedies, but this only leads to a skewing of their meaning. The meaningless "old symbols" that Pinsky rejects are the symbols Americans see everyday—the eagle, the Statue of Liberty, the symbols on the dollar—but whose true meaning they have forgotten or not cared to learn. Pinsky begs the reader to reflect on the images seen everyday and remember what they represent. It is not enough to use and treasure these objects and symbols; one must understand the origins of these figures in order to understand and appreciate his own beliefs and values. For Pinsky, these symbols were always loaded, but we've accelerated the complication of them by engaging them increasingly as symbols of a hollow patriotism. In "The Anniversary," Pinsky mixes together the symbols of remembrance for September 11<sup>th</sup> with pop culture figures and other classic American figures to illustrate the arbitrary way we use language. By pairing a famous, tragic event such as 9/11 with images of Donald Duck and The Raelettes, Pinsky exposes the triviality of the symbols that American society deems important. James Longenbach notes that Pinsky "resists any vocabulary for poetry that becomes exclusionary and taken for granted" because "all poetic language is more or less arbitrary, none of it closer to the heart than any other" (Longenbach 158). Pinsky's daring use of language in his poems reflects his desire to return meaning to language and expand the boundaries of what is considered to be acceptable poetic language. He attempts to return meaning to language by demonstrating how frivolously we use it.

Pinsky's focus on language reflects his belief that poets must transform language before they can write poems about political or public topics. In his essay "Responsibilities of the Poet," Pinsky defines this act of transforming language as the process of challenging and including "what may seem unpoetic, that which has not already been made poetic by the tradition" (Pinsky 426). Pinsky acknowledges the difficulty of looking away from society's definitions of poetic language and subject matter, but urges poets to understand that poetry is a "valuable gift," and that they must "answer both for preserving it and changing it" (Pinsky 426). For Pinsky, poets have a duty to speak to the public, but they cannot do so without altering conventional poetic subject matter; they must "answer for the unpoetic" if they wish to address public concerns without losing their creative power and freedom (Pinsky 426). Longenbach identifies this as Pinsky's "quest to keep poetry open to all kinds of language and experience" (Longenbach 175). In *Gulf Music*, Pinsky must provide a response to September 11<sup>th</sup>, but he must first find a way to access it through new language. In order to speak about the tragedy of September 11<sup>th</sup> in an honest manner, Pinsky transforms his emotions and language into words and phrases that, at first glance, appear nonsensical—almost as incomprehensible as the tragedy itself:

In the movies we dream up, our captured heroes

Tell the interrogator their commanding officer's name

Is Colonel Donald Duck—he writes it down, code

Of a lowbrow memory so assured it's nearly

Aristocratic. Some say the doomed firefighters

Before they hurried into the doomed towers wrote

Their Social Security numbers on their forearms. (Pinsky 19.12-18)

Pinsky joins images representative of September 11<sup>th</sup>, “doomed firefighters” and “doomed towers,” with Donald Duck and the fictitious world of movies. The make-believe world where captured soldiers joke with their captor about a specifically American reference transitions into a rumor about the proceedings of the tragedy. Pinsky does not rely on his own memories or emotions, but rather uses objects of common knowledge like Donald Duck and the image of the firefighters rushing into the towers to speak about September 11<sup>th</sup>. Pinsky’s inclusionary sense of language illustrates the possibility that all language can have a place in poetry and that the stretching of poetry’s linguistic limits can too become an act of witness. In “Responsibilities of the Poet,” Pinsky states that poetry of witness requires poets to “answer for what we see,” but that they can only do so by “looking away from what society has learned to see poetically” (Pinsky 425-426). Pinsky’s turning away from conventional poetic language allows his poetry, his response to what he sees, to be unique in its honesty and to push the limits.

Barry Goldensohn expands on this idea in his 2009 article, “Myriad Minded: The Poetry of Robert Pinsky,” by asserting that Pinsky’s tendency toward “complication and dissonance” in his poetry (which we see in “The Anniversary”) is not simply a matter of his personal poetic style, but rather a style that is “integral to a vision of truth, and poetry’s responsibility to truth,” a vision that characterizes Pinsky’s larger poetic project (Goldensohn 33). Pinsky’s chaotic and disconnected use of language helps him tackle his sense of responsibility to the public by providing him with a new, innovative way to enter into the discussion of political issues. In “Responsibilities of the Poet,” Pinsky connects the

dots between responsibility and language: “The poet's first social responsibility, to continue the art, can be filled only through the second, opposed responsibility to change the terms of the art as given—and it is given socially, which is to say politically” (Pinsky 433). Therefore, what may seem complicated and dissonant to us is in essence Pinsky’s manner of turning away from characteristically “poetic” language and subject matter to effectively answer for what he sees.

Language forms an integral part of Pinsky’s mode of witness because it allows him to document the events of the past and present in order to carry them forward to the next generation, while also expanding the art of poetry. Pinsky’s mode of witness in *Gulf Music* differs from that of Levine and Komunyakaa in that he does not rely on personal memories, but rather uses common histories and examines the formation of history via language and its effect on culture. Pinsky bears witness to events that occur around him, such as September 11<sup>th</sup>, and uses this subjective act to make an objective statement about American culture as a whole. While investigating the response to September 11<sup>th</sup>, Pinsky examines our fascination with, and reliance on, the media, saying:

So on television we watched

The terrible spectacle, repetitiously gazing

Until we were sick not only of the sight

Of our prodigious systems turned against us

But of the very systems of our watching. (Pinsky 19.3-7)

Actions of sight, looking and watching, hold the stanzas together. The American people watch the “terrible spectacle” of planes crashing into towers as Pinsky watches them watch

the television. As Komunyakaa watched a young woman burn from napalm and Levine watched a woman assemble car parts in a factory, Pinsky bears witness by watching Americans experience the tragedy of September 11<sup>th</sup>. However, Pinsky's observation differs from that of Levine and Komunyakaa because of the distance from the event and the difference in audience, which are caused by the difference between the recounting of a personal and a communal experience. By recording the response to September 11<sup>th</sup> in "The Anniversary," Pinsky witnesses the kind of materialist society that Americans are creating. Pinsky warns that our society's focus on materialism, embodied by the creation of physical objects to commemorate September 11<sup>th</sup>, will turn what "holds us together" into a "gluttonous dreamy thriving" because the reification of memories and emotions, such as the ones created by the tragedy, strips the meaning from them as we turn people, feelings, and history into commodities (Pinsky 20.33-34). To avoid this and to be a witness for the future, Pinsky observes the responses to the event, places his mark of judgment upon them, and records them for future readers. Although he does not write so much out of personal experience, Pinsky still bears witness because he finds a way to intersect the personal and the political. The personal for Pinsky becomes the event that is not experienced just by him, but rather the one that unites all the people of his country through a shared experience. He takes this shared experience and wrestles with the language that surrounds it in order to transform it into a poem that carries political weight and resonates with the public.

In addition to investigating American values through language, Pinsky also uses his poetry to discuss memory and forgetting and the effects they have on culture. Pinsky sets himself the task of remembering the present, and in doing so, he discovers and questions the collective American memory and its deficits of convenience. In the poem "Louie Louie,"

the speaker strings together items that he has and has never heard before. He states, “I have heard of Black Irish but I never/Heard of White Catholic or White Jew” (Pinsky 16.1-2). The speaker goes on to list a handful of contradictions, a list of people and places he does and does not know. He claims to “have never heard of” people like George W. Bush, the Beastie Boys, the Scottsboro Boys, or Roger Williams. Such an act harkens back to the message of “The Anniversary” where objects are assigned more importance than their origin or meaning, creating an ongoing pattern of juxtaposition between the meaningful and the trivial in which the truly valuable becomes misplaced. In the poem’s final stanza, the speaker asserts:

I have never heard America  
Singing but I have heard of I  
Hear America Singing, I think  
It must have been a book  
We had in school, I forget. (Pinsky 17. 24-28)

The enjambment of the phrase “I think” conveys the difficulty of accurate memory and the tendency of people to claim things of which they are not certain. The speaker thinks he knows “I Hear America Singing,” but he cannot be sure, just as he cannot be sure that he has never heard America singing. The phrase “I think” parallels the closing phrase “I forget” in structure and significance. By linking these phrases together, Pinsky conveys that thinking and forgetting are overlapping processes. The speaker may remember specific names because he paid attention to them, but not their meaning. Likewise, he may think he has never heard of something when really he did not take the time to listen or remember. In “The Anniversary,” Pinsky asks, “Who are the Americans, not/A people by blood or

religion?” (Pinsky 20.26-27). Blood and religion do not define Americans as they do in other countries and cultures. All that Americans have are unreliable memories and histories to make up the story of who they are. Therefore, if these memories and histories are inconsistent or inaccurate, who are the Americans? If not blood, religion, memory, or history, what makes up the culture of America, and how can we know for sure? Pinsky tackles these questions by investigating how the language we use to create memories and histories shapes our recollection of, and our response to, events such as September 11<sup>th</sup>. He also examines the effect of these memories on the image of America that we are leaving behind for the unborn.

The poem entitled “The Forgetting” also tackles issues of modern memory by dealing with the “fragility of the mind itself, and the complex ways in which memory can be shelved” (Goldensohn 35). In the poem, the speaker admits that his memory is full of “so much crap, jumbled with so much that seems to matter...and all the forgetting that preceded [his] own” (Pinsky 14.3, 5). He separates “crap” from what “seems to matter” with the phrase “jumbled with,” but the two are linked in that both are actually useless and should be forgotten. What “seems to matter” does only that—“seems” to matter—but in reality it does not matter at all. The inclusion of the phrase “all the forgetting that preceded my own” speaks to Pinsky’s poetic duty to provide an accurate depiction of the times. The speaker’s memory is filled with names and events that his ancestors reified and, consequently, devalued (as Pinsky argues is happening in “The Anniversary”). Pinsky hopes to upend this cycle by showing readers the necessity of reassigning meaning to events and things that have lost it. He illustrates the unreliable process of memory when he says, “They just weren’t listening. Or/No, they were listening, but in a certain way. In it comes,



you hear it, and/That selfsame second you swallow it or forget it: an ecstasy of forgetting” (Pinsky 15.28-30). Forgetting brings a feeling of ecstasy because it lessens the sense of responsibility that a person feels. When one remembers something, he is responsible for it. When one forgets something, he bears no allegiance to it. We treat memories like products that we own and thus they become disposable. As a public poet, Pinsky assumes all of the responsibility to history that we have given up. According to Goldensohn, Pinsky mixes various voices and references in his poems to “convey the irreverence and fragmentariness of the American historical imagination” (Goldensohn 35). Pinsky conveys the fragmentation of memory, specifically historical memory, by illustrating the difficult process of accurate memory and also the repercussions of inaccurate memory. The challenging nature of this process creates problems for the formation of culture and historical memories, and speaks to Pinsky’s overall poetic project as a witness. Memories create history, and history creates culture, and without accuracy in these areas we risk losing the run of ourselves. Pinsky challenges himself to remember and record events from his lifetime in order to carry them forward in poetry, but if he cannot remember them accurately, that will alter the history of our generation. Similarly, if he cannot use accurate language to portray events in poetry, Americans will not get a justified vision of what has occurred. Language and memory therefore go hand-in-hand as one depends upon the other for accurate representation, and both are challenged, according to Pinsky, by political and commercial systems.

According to Pinsky in the final note to *Gulf Music*, “forgetting is never perfect, just as recall is never total; the list or the person’s name or the poem or the phone number may be recalled but never with the exact feeling it had. And conversely the details may be

obliterated, but a feeling lingers on” (Pinsky 81). Forgetting is an important theme of Pinsky’s poetic project because it illustrates the need for poets to be witnesses for the future and carry their art forward. The way that memories twist, tangle, and reshape themselves influences the way we remember and commemorate events. To claim forgetting as “never perfect” seems oxymoronic, or perhaps ironic, but for Pinsky, the fact that forgetting is not always perfect and recall is not always complete makes it necessary for him and other poets to expand, and eventually break, the boundaries of poetic language. Neither forgetting nor memory is ever perfect because one can never remember the details or the feelings exactly. No matter what, something about the memory will change over time. Therefore, Pinsky and other poets who engage in similar projects feel responsible for recording important historical events and ensuring that these details are not forgotten. While they desire to do this, they cannot if they do not have access to the language that will allow them to express not only their personal experiences, but also the facts and details of the event and the public response to it.

Pinsky engages with poetry of witness because he sees the need for an exchange of poetry and lessons from generation to generation. In the poem “If the Dead Came Back,” Pinsky conveys this idea when he asks:

What if the dead came back not only  
 In the shape of your skull your mouth your hands  
 The voice inside your mouth the voice inside  
 Your skull the words in your ears the work in your hands...

The dead who know the future require a blood offering

Or your one hand accuses the other both lacking any

Sacrifice for the engendering appetites of the dead. (Pinsky 18.16-18)

Pinsky asks if we are prepared for the dead to come back. Have we done something with what they gave us, and do we have something that we are prepared to offer to them, and to the unborn generations, as he asks in "Responsibilities of the Poet"? But by the end of the poem, Pinsky has concluded that no, we do not have something to offer the dead because both hands are "lacking any sacrifice" to feed the dead. The sacrifice that we lack is the poetry that we have not carried forward. The hands in the poem symbolize poetry via the act of writing, and they are empty because we have not learned from the past lessons and art given to us by former generations. If the dead were to invade our hands, our skulls, our mouths, our words, they would be disappointed to see that we have not advanced the art of poetry, or learned from what they left us. We do not have anything to offer or please the dead because we have not focused on language and culture, but instead on material objects and poetry that does not serve a civil purpose. We have forgotten their message to us.

By demonstrating the importance and the shortcomings of language, Pinsky opens readers' eyes to the difficulty of writing poetry in the public domain, but also the necessity of doing so. Pinsky's work serves a dual purpose: it allows him to cast his mark upon current events and record them for future generations to study, but it also allows present-day readers to encounter their society's values face-to-face and gives them a chance to confront and challenge them. Praises for Pinsky's efforts are abundant. He is recognized as not only a highly successful poet and critic, but also as an innovator. As Longenbach states in "Robert Pinsky and the Language of Our Time," a "poet's mark may be measured by his or her ability to expand the language (which is to say the culture) available to poetry," and

“Pinsky has slowly become the more truly innovative poet—the poet who increases the possibilities open to poetry” (Longenbach 157). In “‘Also this, Also that’: Robert Pinsky’s Poetics of Inclusion” (1992), Peter Sacks argues that Pinsky is the future of American poetry when he says, “American poetry will move with him. There are few poets or critics better able to challenge and lead us from this century to the next, and perhaps none who will do so with the dazzling combination of energy, invention, and generous delight, both in poetry and in the world” (Sacks 280). Pinsky’s strong sense of poetic responsibility challenges poets to change the state of the art and the uses of poetry. He dares poets to find the language to convey tragedies and catastrophes, and challenges poetry to advance and accept such themes, and, by extension, challenges the culture at large to learn from the civilly inclined poem.

## Conclusion

In his 2001 article “The Nineties Revisited,” Willard Spiegelman asks about the difference between two groups of poets, the first containing Levine and Komunyakaa, plus poets such as Louise Glück, Jorie Graham, Mark Strand, Charles Wright, and Lisel Mueller, and the second containing Pinsky and a handful of poets including Frank Bidart, Robert Hass, John Ashbery, Allen Ginsberg, Adrienne Rich, and Seamus Heaney. The answer? The poets in the first group won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry during the decade before the millennium, while those in the second group did not<sup>3</sup>. Spiegelman wonders what it is about the state of American poetry we can ascertain from the group of winners, if anything at all; he says of awards such as the Pulitzer Prize, “Literary prizes often indicate little aside from the vagaries of taste, the winds of change and fashion, and the perennial influence of politics, cronyism, and back-scratching, as well as the frequent rising to the top of every committee member’s *second choice*” (Spiegelman 206). Yet Spiegelman notes that the list of winners “attests to the diversity of the art and its practitioners” because it displays a stronger mix of race and gender than winners of other awards, such as the National Book Award, and it represents a wider variety of forms, including post-romantics, formalists, surrealists, and those like Levine and Komunyakaa who write mainly about personal histories (Spiegelman 209). He examines the themes and style of each poet in the winning list and concludes that American poetry on the brink of the new millennium internalizes

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<sup>3</sup> The results remain unchanged since the publication of Spiegelman’s article, with the exception of Robert Hass, who won the Pulitzer Prize in 2008 for his collection, *Time and Materials: Poems, 1997-2005*.

the ending of the decade with a retrospective nature found in the work of almost all of the poets in the group of winners.

If what Spiegelman finds in the decade before the millennium is a looking-back in poetry, what we find after examining the work of Levine, Komunyakaa, and Pinsky from the late 1980s to the mid-2000s is a looking-back on the personal or collective past, or the collective present, in order to make a statement about what should be recorded for the future. These collections also express concern for poetry itself. Pinsky seeks to increase the field of poetic language so that it includes all types of language and can develop and continue the art form as one that is civilly engaged. All three poets hope and work for a poetry that can support a position of witness in conjunction with some form of vatic expression and motivation.

*Gulf Music*, *Dien Cai Dau*, and *What Work Is* are collections of contemporary American poetry that not only embrace, but also embody, the need for a poet to understand his ability to capture the attention of the public and address the issues that are too often excluded from poetry. In their collections, Pinsky, Komunyakaa, and Levine confront the topics that our society often deems “off-limits.” They question the issues they see or have experienced—racism, classism, war—and force the public to have a necessary encounter with these problems. Poetry facilitates this encounter by creating a unique relationship between poet, speaker, and reader in which the poet can speak to the reader through a lens that is both artistic and socially conscious. Although they fall under the theme of public poets, each uses vatic impulses to balance their civil responsibilities and give a unique meaning to the idea of “poetry of witness.”

In Pinsky's collection, values and events of importance are tangled with pop culture references and insignificant objects to create a seemingly nonsensical puzzle of language from which the reader must decipher the true meaning of the poem, and what it is the poem teaches us about the culture at large. Pinsky's style parallels and exemplifies his message because it explicates his feelings of duty as a poet by placing the reader in direct contact with the creation of memories and history through language, and the ability to alter memories, and ultimately the art of poetry, by expanding and validating such language.

Although Komunyakaa uses his power as a poet to address public, political issues, he draws the majority of his inspiration from his personal experiences. Komunyakaa's use of vivid, violent language and images exposes the crimes committed by, and against, himself in Vietnam. He takes on the role of a witness to express his personal guilt and shame, take responsibility for his and his platoon's actions, and give his audience a taste of the war he experienced as an African American soldier. Komunyakaa does not expect change to come as a result of his collection, but rather uses it to air his conscience and push others to consider his actions as well as the larger machinations of United States foreign policy.

Like Komunyakaa, Levine's main task as a public, political poet is to speak for people who are not often given a voice in poetry. Because Levine escaped the brutal factory work he was subjected to as a young adult, he uses his authority as a poet to speak for the people who are still trapped in this occupation. Levine's work carries deep personal connections, often reading like a set of journal entries, and urges its readers to consider the classism that underlies our society and our failure to recognize class in art and elsewhere. As Heaney says in "The Redress of Poetry," a poem that successfully considers the civil and vatic "could be read at certain historical moments as a way of comprehending ironies and

reversals more extensive than the personal crisis which it records" (Heaney 13). The poems in Levine's collections document his personal memories, but also can be applied to larger social issues, and thus they successfully expand from personal to public.

While Pinsky, Komunyakaa, and Levine use their individual styles and backgrounds to define and display their poetic responsibilities, all three serve as poets of witness because of their work with, and exposure of, unspeakable issues. The autobiographical nature of Levine and Komunyakaa's work offers insight into the intertwining of the personal and the social realms, while Pinsky's critiques on political systems and the formation of public memory address civil concerns and implore the public to consider the image of American society that we are creating. These collections offer a window into one possible future of American poetry: a genre defined by real, immediate issues and the courage to address them.



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