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## On Hayden Carruth: The Poetics of Social Utility

by Douglas Unger

Hayden Carruth is one of the first poets I confessed to about making a possibly illicit use of poetry. While writing prose, when I'm struggling for an appropriate language figure or pattern in a sentence, I often reach for books of poems. I page through them, scanning lines the way a mechanic in his shop might sort through jars of screws, nuts and engine parts to keep going with a repair. Poetry can fix things, get prose back on the road.

Hayden gave me his hearty approval to use poems in this way. He insisted poetry should be *of use*, that above all, poetry should *make sense*, both common and uncommon sense. Writers should make use of each other and be available to other writers. Together, we can find strength against a world that in the main is hostile to poets and writers and seeks our destruction.

What Hayden encouraged is a sense of writerly community, in part based on a conviction that *it's us against them*. He put it just this way. And I don't believe he meant the "us" to be any elitist club of poets and writers or anything of that ilk, the "poetocracy"—as he called it—which he detested. He meant Humanists in the traditional sense, as in *persons of letters*. We should form a literary community allied against the forces that seek our obliteration. This is an intensely political stance, and the force his politics runs through Hayden's writing.

Hayden Carruth refers to himself as an "anarchist" and cites Bakunin in his poems. He frequently recalls his family's Socialist roots. The example of his life is one of a perpetual self-exile from engagement with organized politics and as much as possible from mainstream consumerist society. For much of his life, he withdrew from large groups of people, not only to restore his sanity and achieve clarity of mind amid the harsh, wintry solitude of Johnson, Vermont, or of Munnsville, New York, but all the better to embrace the endangered Yankee values of thrift, hard work, appreciation of life, and concrete achievement through struggles and trials. This becomes a paradox of Hayden's life—his personal isolation as if all the more intensely to express community and political values in his writing.

In his autobiographical fragments, Hayden advises young writers, "You need difficulty, you need necessity." Life dealt Hayden necessity. He also sought it out. His poems that I reach for continually are the activist political statements born of

necessity, filled with protests and outrages at current political leaders and topical events. This is the kind of political force that I find lacking, a vacuous failure, in so much of contemporary American poetry.

Carruth's political poetry anchors itself not so much in the topical as the more general, though in quite a number of lines he invokes the names of sitting politicians and references current events. The poet positions political statement as thematically generalized, transcending the specific, and is exemplified in an early poem, "My Father's Face," a poem that works through family and political conflicts that once contributed to driving the poet to a nervous breakdown:

but the power of money has bought the power of heart  
monopoly eats the word, eats thought, desire,  
your old companions now in the thick of it, eating

is that betrayal? They fatten, but for my part  
old hatred deepens,  
deepening as monopoly deepens,

until my socialism has driven me to the sociality  
of trees, snow, rocks, the north—solitude.

This poem expresses the Carruthian paradox: a political voice is cultivated in solitude; aesthetics arise from toil, compost, chainsaws; a poet-lover's gift is a day in hell; a community is found in exile and asylum; wise statement, or useful assertion more than wordplay, can make beautiful poems. Read together over fifty years of his work, the many diverse voices in Carruth's poetry combine into a stern working-class critique of American values:

We forget sometimes that a shattered person  
Twists and cries and dies like a dog or a woodchuck  
Flesh ripped apart, ragged, bloody. Violent sex  
is what war is and what the warriors are.

(from "Bosnia")

...Yes, old men now must tell  
our young world how these bigots and these retired  
Bankers of Arizona are ringing the death-knell

For all of us, how ideologies compel  
Children to violence. Artifice acquired  
For its own sake is war...

(from "Saturday at the Border")

... Well, o.k. But  
to me the climate's basic. Change  
that and you're done for. What

could do it but the system?

(from Asphalt Georgics, "Names")

## II.

In her book, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Modernism: The "New" Poetics (2002), critic Marjorie Perloff complains about "the unfulfilled promise of the revolutionary poetic impulse in so much of what passes for poetry today—a poetry singularly unambitious in its attitude to the materiality of the text," (5-6). And in her signature work, The Poetics of Indeterminacy, the poet's subjective voice, and the poet's *persona* or poetic self as a representation, are criticized by Perloff as if no longer deserving of a relevant artistic claim in the aftermath of Modernism. She rejects narrative and formalist poetry as being romantic or reactionary. Perloff advocates a poetics based in large part on self-conscious language experimentation, poems that point emphatically at their own language and at their own "materiality" as texts.

Nowhere in Perloff is there much space made for the poetics of statement. Perhaps her stance can be justified as a reaction to the canonical establishment of narrative poets and of their poet-personalities in the previous generation, best exemplified by the table of contents of Donald Hall's Remembering Poets, or by years of Robert Lowell then Galway Kinell writing essays for The New York Review of Books. After all, every vanguard produces an opposing *avant garde*, and Perloff's voice becomes one of its strongest advocates.

There is no doubt great critical value in Perloff's books and essays, still, what are we to make of her divisiveness? In her relentless advocacy, the poets and poetry of political relevance, of social utility, are harshly dismissed, not least among them the poetry of Hayden Carruth.

Through the 1970s and 1980s in American poetry, the postmodern wave of so-called *language poets* (if this term even applies anymore), exemplified for Perloff by John Ashbery, Charles Bernstein, Susan Howe, Lyn Hejnenian, and others, directly opposed in their aesthetic Hayden Carruth's *poetry of use*—his political poetry, his insistence on social utility. As a result of the rising popularity, or dominance in the "poetocracy" by these postmodern poets and their critics, Hayden suffered years of rejection and marginalization. No doubt that some of this rejection resulted from personal vendettas and reactions to Hayden's own tough, uncompromising editorial and critical stances when he served as editor of "Poetry", and in numerous reviews and essays. By the late 1980s, Carruth found himself so marginalized that almost all of his books fell out of print, and he despaired of a world that seemed to have turned its back on traditional poetic forms and the poetry of social utility. He kept writing, though never confident that he could; and his poems as though in response to his

rejection became even more grounded in his reach for wise statement and political relevance.

In Hayden's later works—in so many diversely voiced poems in Scrambled Eggs & Whiskey, in Doctor Jazz, in Asphalt Georgics, in Letters to Jane—he reaches for wise statement. Seeking for truth enters his arguments, and post-structuralism be damned, *meaning* is intended. In “voiced” poems that represent not so much the poet as the speaking voices of many exemplary, working class American characters, Carruth reaches for social and political relevance. As Philip Booth states, “In the poet’s consciousness of his relationship to the actual, what’s ordinary becomes extraordinary as it is raised by the power of a voice, however quiet....”

Wendell Berry confirms this reading: “The thing we notice immediately is that the poem comes to us in the sound of a voice speaking.... Hayden Carruth is the master in poetry of the speaking voice—the result of technical skill so perfect and assured that it does not pause to admire itself, and therefore calls little attention to itself...”

In Carruth's rendering of “ordinary” voices, all the language experiments any reader could desire can be discovered, in cleverly composed word collages, musical notes and half-tones, subtle rhyme schemes, unusual line breaks and enjambments, crafted techniques often made less obvious on first reading because of the overwhelming power of the poem's statements. Formal music and poetic devices can be masked by political relevance:

...Then the first wire broke,  
and the second, and the garage collapsed

sideways like a fat senator loaded with scotch  
on the state house lawn....

(from “Surrealism”)

---- How the hell  
can he come home at night and look  
at you and the kids af-  
ter messing all day with them bombs?

(from “Phone”)

Most of the starving children die peacefully  
in their weakness, lying passive and still.  
They themselves are as unaware of their  
passing away as everyone else. But a few...

(from “The Camps”)

## III.

In the 1980s and '90s, the practice by the National Book Foundation to give out the National Book Award was to invite the nominees in the categories to a gala and ceremony in New York, at which the writers in each category were asked to sit together on a stage and wait for the announcement of the winner. In this fashion, for what amounts to an elaborate social affair for the literary elite, writers were put on display for an audience composed mainly of publishers, editors and booksellers. A name was announced in each category. The winner rose to accept the award and be applauded, with the four or five runners-up writers sitting by, acting as a living backdrop for the winners.

When Hayden Carruth's Collected Shorter Poems was nominated for a National Book Award in 1992, he discovered himself subjected to this ceremony, forced to sit by mutely as Mary Oliver won the award. Hayden found this way of doing things ridiculous, and worse, he felt humiliated. It wasn't that he couldn't take not winning the prize—he was used to not winning prizes; and he was gracious and congratulatory to Mary Oliver, whose work he appreciated. Still, the whole thing pissed him off. We talked about this afterwards, about the physical effort of the trip, plus the added costs to get to New York only to find himself sitting onstage, feeling stripped naked before a publishing world he felt had long ignored his work and the work of most poets in favor of an increasingly cynical marketplace commercialism. And to be put on display as a loser in front of *them*—Hayden didn't feel it was right to put *any* writer through such a rude ordeal, and certainly not for philistines. He told Bruce Berling—the esteemed poet, translator and Professor Emeritus of Colgate University, and an old friend and neighbor—the same story.

In 1996, a new collection of Hayden's poems, Scrambled Eggs & Whiskey, was nominated for the National Book Award. Instead of making the trip to New York, the evening of the ceremony, Bruce Berling and his wife invited W. S. Merwin, his wife, and Hayden and his wife, Joe-Anne McLaughlin, over for a wine-filled dinner spent talking of just about everything but the award ceremony. They shared a wonderful time, even as simultaneously, at the gala in New York, Janie Wilson, of Copper Canyon Press, uneasily accepted the prize on Hayden's behalf, expressing his critical sentiments: "Like most poets, Hayden writes out of a passionate commitment to his art, and he is disinclined toward competition in the practice of his poetry.... Five years ago, Hayden's books were largely unavailable and out of print, and Copper Canyon published his Collected Shorter Poems, which was also nominated for a National Book Award and didn't win."

Meanwhile, Hayden and Joe-Anne were getting happily drunk at Bruce Berling's place. No one remembers how anyone got home. The next morning, Bruce received a phone call about Hayden winning the award. He and Bill Merwin drove to Hayden and Joe-Anne's farmhouse near Munnsville to wake them up for a cheery, hungover breakfast celebration.

Hayden is proud of the stance he took in not attending that award ceremony. Generally, he stayed away from other such affairs, reinforcing the high value he placed on the poet's public presence by pointedly refusing to appear. He turned

down President Bill Clinton and First Lady Hillary Clinton's invitation to the White House two years later, his curt R.S.V.P. airing acidly on National Public Radio:

...Thank you for thinking of me. However, it would seem the greatest hypocrisy for an honest American poet to be present on such an occasion at the seat of power which has not only neglected but abused the interests of poets and their readers continually, to say nothing of many other administratively dispensable segments of the population. Consequently, I must decline.

— Hayden Carruth.

Two years before this, in Washington's "National Airport"—Hayden refused ever to refer to it by its re-named "Ronald Reagan Airport" in any form—he expressed his revulsion to the politicians in Washington, D.C., in a letter to Jane Kenyon written while waiting for a flight. The letter included a poem penned that morning in a Holiday Inn coffee shop:

Meanwhile rich and famous men are pursuing their lifestyles two blocks away  
 In four-story Federal brick houses with porticoes and flagstone steps.  
 Fucking each other's wives in dens and laundry rooms and pantries.  
 This is called a party. Some are Democrats, some Republicans, all are fuckers.  
 They are emboldened by bourbon and vodka and the anticipation of power.  
 Tomorrow they will arise hungover and wield the resources of the nation.

(from "In Georgetown")

Throughout his life, Hayden Carruth believed that poets and writers should be willing to put themselves *on the line*, as it were, put even their well-beings *out there* with their words by taking public stances in support of what they believe in, even at the possible risk of their livelihoods and reputations. In an early interview with David Weiss, Hayden Carruth outlines the origins for this aspect of his poetics of social relevance, his *poetry of use*:

The people who affected me most when I was in my twenties and early thirties were the mid-century European existentialist writers, and they had the idea of engagement and responsibility that I believed in and still believe in...I have never been a poet for poetry's sake. I never have been able to do that. I was raised in a family where my grandfather and my father were both newspapermen and professional writers, and always they insisted on the social utility of writing...

Carruth struggled to balance this sense of social utility against the distressing cultural vacuity of American culture and its marketplace disenfranchisement of

poets and literary writers from playing impactful political roles in society. My overall sense from his poems and letters is that Hayden consistently believed (as he also stated in the same early interview with David Weiss) that the cause for this marginalization of artists is a larger malaise that affects American society relative to others in the world, and one that marks in significant measure its ever deepening social crisis and decline:

...Americans live in a kind of political torpor. We feel helpless. The kind of changes we know ought to be made are not being made. In our poetry we tend to turn away. We all work in the knowledge that we're not producing any effect on our civilization. The politicians and the powerful people in our country conduct their operations and their lives without any reference to art at all. In other places, that's not true.

#### IV.

That my own personal relationship should play a strong role in this essay on Hayden Carruth's poetry might seem out of place. Little to be done about this, as I read his writing in the context of our friendship, with emotions and memories of how deeply he affected my life and the lives of my family. Also, I must believe that politics is grounded in personal experience, and a poetics of social utility expands from the personal to achieve more general relevance and express significant truths.

In late February, 1988, my wife, Amy Burk, and I, sat together at Hayden's bedside in an ICU unit of a hospital near Oneida, New York. We took turns holding his hand, by turns also talking to him, hoping he might take comfort in our familiar voices as he was gradually returning to consciousness and clarity after a very nearly successful suicide attempt. Hayden was hoarse, hardly able to speak. His lips were stained black from granulated charcoal the doctors had pumped into him to absorb the cocktail of deadly medications he had swallowed.

Why did he do this? The most immediate and available reason we talked about was that he had fallen into despair over a lost love relationship. But I'll always believe that this suicide attempt also resulted from a more existential impasse with life and its significance rising from a crisis brought on by his doubts about what he perceived to be the value of his writing and its reception. In the late 1980s, the publishing culture, and the "poetocracy" that seemed so dominated by such divisive figures as Marjorie Perloff and Helen Vendler, had turned its back on Hayden and his work. This was at the end of a period when many of his books were being let by commercial publishers and even smaller presses to go out of print. That winter, we had conversed frequently about and complained of this sad state, and Hayden had been steadily sinking more deeply into depression.

It was a hard, cold winter. We were all also concerned and downcast by Ray Carver's lung cancer, Hayden extremely pessimistic about Ray's chances. My wife, Amy, had just come out of an especially violent, public psychotic break caused by the manic-depressive illness that afflicted her all her life, during which she had streaked naked through the snow and ice of Campus Avenue at Syracuse University and had

to be tackled to the ground by university police. Hayden had helped Amy through her recovery, visiting her frequently in the hospital, essential to bucking up her self-esteem once more, the two of them sharing, often with sly laughter, their life-long experiences fighting off insanity and madness. He called her mad, naked winter sprint her “constitutional run.” He kept reminding her what good company she was in now, Syracuse University the place where Delmore Schwartz had suffered a similar, legendary breakdown. We all talked together a great deal about the world, and more—as in his poem, “Mother”, which Amy had memorized—those “long years of my private wrecked language, when my mind shook in the/ tempests of fear”.

After his suicide attempt, Amy and I visited Hayden faithfully in a psychiatric ward, where he was committed for the following month. The talks we shared are difficult to describe, since we exchanged so much by a shared dumb forbearance expressed mainly in grunts, gestures, and numerous shared cigarettes. We “kissed the wall” together at the push-button electric lighter to kindle them, like a car lighter set into a little wire cage near the door, as he described later in his essay, “Suicide,” a prose masterpiece which makes an astonishing turn of the drive to kill himself into an uplifting, at times even comical meditation on happiness and spirituality.

When he got out of the “hatch” as he called it, we met regularly for dinner. Hayden was riding an upswing by then, looking spry and energized by an emerging Spring. Hayden got busy again teaching, and putting together poems for Tell Me Again How The White Heron Rises and Flies Across the Nacreous River at Twilight Toward the Distant Islands. He spent a lot of time staying in Syracuse, often at Stephen and Isabel Dobyns’ big hospitable home, embraced into the warmth of their bustling family, an atmosphere always full of the high energy of children, our students, and visiting writers.

We all became closer friends because of him, because of our caring for him. That summer, Hayden fell in love with Joe-Anne McLaughlin, sometimes meeting with her and courting her at our home, where she stayed for a time. We observed the poet with a spring in his step, gripping a bunch of wildflowers and his new book of verses, dressed in his best hounds-tooth jacket—he was a smitten suitor, ringing our doorbell to call out his lady love to play.

Ray Carver died that August. We were together in this, too, with eulogies and functions that kept going, for years. Hayden proved steadfast in his emotional and professional support for Tess Gallagher, who was devastated, as were we all. Ray Carver had introduced me to Hayden Carruth six years before, always one to link friends with friends and at the same time pass on their books. And together, at a big country party on a farm that felt like a scene painted by Jan Brueghel the Elder, sun shining with precisely those tones and qualities of northern light, Ray and Hayden had welcomed me into my first full-time teaching job, and into their literary community. At that party, I mentioned the quality of light as in a Brueghel, then sat, astonished, as Hayden and Ray started trading off lines from William Carlos Williams, between them reciting the whole poem.

This memory is all the more valued and poignant now, as full as it is of the very tough emotions of grief and loss, recalling Ray Carver’s death, and Hayden’s, missing now such good friends. More difficult still is remembering my late wife, Amy, who died of lung cancer in 2003, though it still feels like last week. She was far



more intriguing, loquacious and interesting than I could be, and closer to Hayden—sly poet—who signed his books first to Amy then to me. Hayden, Amy and I kept up a correspondence for two decades, with Amy writing far more letters than I did, and Hayden always faithful to answer, his letters typed on the blank sides of partial draft pages of new poems, which we would just as eagerly read.

Just hours before she died, Hayden and Joe-Anne spoke to Amy over the phone. I stood by her bed, passed the phone to her, then she passed it back to me, in a tiny cottage overlooking a blue lake that reflected a shimmering panorama of evergreen forest in the Pacific Northwest. Our four voices—Hayden’s, Joe-Anne’s, Amy’s, mine—combined into a kind of staggered, family conversation. We didn’t talk about Amy’s death, which we all knew would be mere hours away. Instead, we traded endearments, those small but significant indulgences expressing our love. We shared the happy news about Joe-Anne’s book, *Jam*, just out from BOA. Then our conversation turned to current events, sharing outrage about the despicable politics and tyranny of that president Hayden called “Shrub”. Amy made quick references to Hayden’s *Doctor Jazz*, which I had been reading to her in the evenings. The short poems titled “Faxes to William” had felt like faxes to Amy, making her laugh, even on her deathbed, and she could recite some of the lines.

That summer, a problem plagued the lake Amy’s tiny cottage looked out over—Canada geese were too numerous, and they had fouled the water with intestinal parasites so that swimmers would break out in rashes, or worse, unless they used earplugs and showered as soon as possible when they got out of the water. These geese came up in the conversation. Amy recited from *Doctor Jazz*: “...Why must we be reminded/that Nature can be as corrupt as Congress?”

We all laughed. It was a fine moment. Then suddenly, Amy felt too tired, seized by a grip of her exhaustion. “I’ll sign off now,” she said. We all said good-bye.

When I think of Amy’s death, then Hayden’s, what comes to mind are the love poems born of his romance to Joe-Anne, so many of them political. In “Testament,” the poet meditates on what he might possibly leave behind, then he despairs of making provisions for the woman he loves in the alienating language of economics:

...Now  
 I am almost entirely love. I have been  
 to the banker, the broker, those strange  
 people, to talk about unit trusts,  
 annuities, CDS, IRAS, trying  
 to leave you whatever I can after  
 I die....

(from “Testament”)

And so it must be, in a country in which it is *us against them*, where what a poet customarily earns, as measured by the values of consumerism, is “at best a pittance in our civilization,/ a widow’s mite...” What then follows in the poem is a defiant list of the poet’s genuine will, what he really values in this world that he leaves to his wife, which includes tulips, and trilliums, and: “our red-bellied/

woodpeckers who have given us so/ much pleasure,"... Then the kisses, embraces and love-makings—"millions"—and more, all held out as the poet's true bequest, which becomes limitless.

Voices in poems by Hayden Carruth argue for their own worth, offering a system of countervailing values to the obscene culture of American consumerism. His poetics of social utility intends to make moral statements, and he seeks a politics based on Humanism. This stance toward poetry should increase in relevance as consumerist culture crumbles around itself in the new century. His poetry will last because it insists on being of use.