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Poetry, Between Alpha and Omega

Thomas Harrison

Alpha. I name the beginning, you the end, and therefore I summon you from afar to help clarify our bond. To what extent is an end, that is, an objective, determined by its point of departure? Or is the beginning overseen by its end?

Omega. It is the latter, which is to say that every alpha male, who apparently originates action, whether dog or man, is subordinate to an omega beyond gender: the principle or *arché* of all gender and genre, all decisions, acts and forms.

Alpha. How typical of you to jump to conclusions—and ones not even envisioned by my point of departure! We need to slow down this rush to ends. The editors of this volume are not interested in cosmology, but in poetry. My question does not concern the origins of forms in general, but the limits and objectives of that form we call poetry. Your omega should not be so imperious!

Omega. The omega determines all genre, “generating” one type of writing or another. The type we call poetry has more knowledge of its ends than a novel or a critical essay. It knows better where it wants to go, what intention it aims to fulfill. This is what produces a poem rather than a play or a novel, where plot is more complex and freer, where subjectivities interact. The beginning of a poem is determined by its end.

Alpha. Beginnings are more my specialty than yours. Haven’t you heard that the first line of a poem occurs in a mysterious conceptual flash, as a spontaneous gift, and it is not even clear from where it comes? After that first line, any poet will tell you, the rest of the composition needs to be painfully and laboriously constructed. Remember Paul Valéry who said, “A poem is never finished, it is just abandoned.” No end lies in sight. A poet writes on a kind of impulse, sometimes even in a mere spirit of play, but eventually grows tired and draws it to an acceptable conclusion. One begins with a bang and ends with a whimper, as T. S. Eliot himself said in “The Hollow Men.” The beginnings are clear, but the purposes not.

Omega. It was W. H. Auden, not Valéry, who said that, and he was paraphrasing something more complex: “A work is never completed except by some accident such as weariness, satisfaction, the need to deliver, or death: for, in relation to who or what is making it, it can only be one stage in a series of inner transformations” (Valéry). This posits something like an art of the incomplete. Perhaps a poem perfects that art better than other forms? Perhaps it never masters what it clearly intends to say? By “work” Valéry meant a grand omega determining the course of an artistic career. In this ongoing production, individual poems are punctual and momentary records. They pursue simpler and more definitive purposes than larger, polyphonic works, even if ambitious poems aspire to nothing less than a crystalline articulation of an omega beyond the reach of the verbosity of novels. Since the Romantics we have thought of poetry as an in-gathering utterance of subjectivity, shared with a reader. It is a fairly monological formulation, originating in a circumscribed situation or feeling. The lyric poem is a watercolor, not a vast oil canvas.

Alpha. How Petrarchan! That first true subjectivist of the west, as some call him, used fine, economical forms to sound out the accents of feeling, to find words for moods that evade them. Even when he was not exploring his own innerness, but writing in a spirit of

encomium, he lauded one or two things alone: an event, a realization, and an all-summatory figure of his dreams—a woman, if not just a figure of dreams that could never be reduced to figures. Talk about the incomplete! Petrarch treated external nature itself in compression, as though it were only an objective correlative of the heart. Poetry, however, is more than this kind of Petrarchan lyric, even if it has a good run straight through to Leopardi. It includes allegorical poems like Dante's *Comedy*, epics like those of Virgil and Homer, Ezra Pound's *Cantos* and Edoardo Sanguineti's *Laborintus*. Leopardi himself was more than a lyricist. Some believe his *Operette morali* to be his best poetry.

Omega. It goes without saying that I am talking of the lyric, not about Ariosto and Tasso or long tales of tribes. Maybe I am too Crocean, but even Aristotle calls the *epos* one thing, a play quite another, and the lyric poem something different again. When being lyrical—writing sonnets, canzoni, or ballads—Dante addresses a circumscribed human experience, no matter how complex his treatment.

Alpha. I worry about the insecurity of beginning, the blank page, the anxiety of where words go, and what they bring back. You want the objective to precede the experiment and determine the journey. You close the openness. Where do poets themselves stand on this issue? And how do they array their positions throughout the centuries? How do readers approach poetry, and what place do poems occupy in the worlds they inhabit? So many questions are posed by this volume of *California Italian Studies* which I was hoping you would help me clarify. Does poetry still play a role in the formative processes of our thinking today? Does it inspire critical theory about our social relations? Not long ago people read poetry regularly—week in, week out. Is that over and done with? If poetry as a genre has not come to an end, as some fear, what are some of those ends today?

Omega. Not even five volumes of this journal could answer all of your questions! But are you sure that poetry has lost its audience? Maybe it has accrued an even larger readership with the global diffusion of literacy.

Alpha. Whatever the current configurations of poetry, they have to compete with innumerable new forms of mental entertainment. The nineteenth century brought newspapers and mass-marketed novels. Then came movies and television. Since the invention of the Internet it is anybody's guess what place—or time—is left for the reading and writing of poetry. And where would you find it within all the foam of that surf! How could it stand out?

Omega. Certainly a valid question. Yet hasn't that Internet opened up unlimited semantic fields in which poetic compositions can be invented and re-invented with an indefinable range of expressive possibilities?

Alpha. It depends on what you mean by poetic. The closest we have come to defining it over the past hundred years is to suggest that poetic statements present things in conspicuously different ways than do normative and socially instrumentalized uses of language—so that whatever is articulated in a peculiar or unusual way appears to be poetic. I am thinking of Viktor Shklovsky and the Russian formalists, and of Roman Jakobson, who all agreed that there is no such thing as poetry in itself, but only a ubiquitous and recurring poetic *function* of language. I don't know that we have made significant inroads beyond this into the essence of poetry, even if interesting steps have been taken to clarify the social institutions that give this poetry its space—allowing, or not allowing, it to operate.

Omega. But this lack of definition is part of the problem! Once we think of poetry as *relative* to an ordinary way of writing, with no essence of its own, with no ends that it intrinsically pursues, as a mere variable in a dialectic, then we have dug ourselves a hole from which it is

hard to climb out. That itself is a symptom of poetic crisis, which was widely proclaimed in the early twentieth century and which prepared the terrain for the vanishing of the genre.

Alpha. That is why I turn to readers, and wonder whether and in what ways they continue to experience poetry. There was a time when all of us knew what poetry was and when it was much more profusely read than it is today, even measured by the number of hours we dedicated to it *per capita* per year. Once the cumulative time spent on poetry, in a society of one thousand people, in which only one hundred read, added up to more than the time dedicated to poetry now, in a society where 850 of those thousand read—despite our greater levels of literacy and the six hours a day we spend reading our iPhones. In countries we call third world poetry plays a greater role in the formation of minds than in post-industrial ones. And this obviously has little to do with literacy, for throughout most of its long life poetry was an oral art, recited and committed to memory, passed on to children by parents and teachers, gelling those minds together. I am not even sure that now occurs through the movies.

Omega. The movies! Poetry is a short, striking, pithy memorable form. I recall the editors' call for papers, noting how intimately tied, and even indebted, the origins of the Italian language were to poetry—to religious and vernacular hymns, to the linguistic experimentations of the 1200s, then to Dante and Boccaccio, and to the development of the peninsula's intellectual resources. The formal evolution of poetry has played a major role not only in illuminating primal human questions, but also in articulating cultural identity, in establishing social values, in defining the very terms of political debate. From the Renaissance to the Risorgimento, from the Neapolitan enlightenment to twentieth-century totalitarianism, Italian poets have voiced highly ambitious and often even troublesome ends, considering poetry to be a venue and inexhaustible storehouse of truth.

Alpha. Yes, the idea of the *poeta vate*! That figure held up well in the long stretch between Homer and D'Annunzio, but has become essentially anathema since the horrors of the two great wars, motivated and ennobled by mystical and superior spokesmen. The great Ezra Pound, someone observed, maybe it was Donald Davie, undid that high authority of poets for good. Embracing Mussolini as the new Thomas Jefferson of the age, he proceeded to pontificate on cultural matters throughout east and west over the course of two millennia, evaluating everything from Confucius to capitalist economy in such a peremptory manner that readers could only cry out, "The Poet is irresponsible! Quit granting him credit! Keep him out of the domain of practical life!" Once they declared Pound mentally unfit we ended up where Plato wanted us to be, with poets—indeed artists generally—appearing to be too unusual characters to clinch social debates, unable to present propositions that stand the true test of knowledge.

Omega. Who knows what that test may be! This too fuels the notion that poetry has reached its end, along the tracks of Hegel, to be fair, who said the same of symbolic art at large. Culturally and epistemologically speaking, the critical revelations of poetry culminated in the vatic declarations of Romantic poets, but were quickly superseded by the burgeoning certainties of nineteenth-century science, then positivism, and finally the technical engineering of the planet in the twentieth. If people still continue to express themselves in poetry, the expressed self no longer bears the ascendant seal of Goethe, Byron, or Leopardi. Writing subjectivities are now myriads of little individualities speaking from the margins of an administered and intractable practical world. Poets may still act as gadflies and sting the

great beast of society, but few do enough damage to cause alarm. Bites come from every which side, but don't seem to hurt; the beast has grown impervious.

Alpha. You speak of the poet having lost political authority, but Pound has many counter-paradigms—like Pier Paolo Pasolini, as relevant as any poet ever was to civic debates, to the point where American universities study him more than all the Italian writers of the past hundred years combined.

Omega. Don't start—or end—with overstatements! Pasolini is no example, or if anything of quite the opposite: of poetry's demise. Universities don't study his poetry, but his films, his essays, his corsair campaigns and scandalous prose. The American academy champions him for those other kinds of works, and in contentious distinction from contemporaries who were writers or philosophers in a purer or more diplomatic sense. For better or worse, Pasolini the non-poet carries more relevant news to readers today than D'Annunzio or Pascoli, Ungaretti or Montale, Saba or Zanzotto, Caproni or Sereni.

Alpha. This points to the ends on which poetry itself relies: the ends of *reading*. Poetry once served as reading's tutor, urging us to meditate on the implications of thoughts, to appreciate them vertically, to plumb their layers upon layers of semantic ambiguity, hidden even in those words that ordinary prose uses uncritically—especially prose whose ends are polemical. The prose that is taught has already decided what is right and wrong.

Omega. Poetic reading also spies *horizontal* connections among concepts spread out over the course of complex discursive acts, unmasking associations and contaminations of the sort that proved so inspiring to Freud. How much understanding can a mind achieve if it is unwilling to ponder the implications of the meanings by which we think? Poetic problems are as relevant as any in the workplace, as those from which one's children suffer, as those whose solutions enable the propelling of rockets.

Alpha. To push my point, between the Italian hermetics and Pasolini there were dozens of political poets, including those whose stylistic audacities were geared towards having civic effects. Take the poets of the neo-avant-garde.

Omega. There is an inevitable relationship between the ends of poetry as “what is over and done with” and as “what still can and should be achieved.” Like the European avant-garde proper to either side of World War I, the *novissimi* clearly thought that a certain type of poetry could no longer be written, as did. Their splintered and discontinuous styles followed from a sense that certain types of traditional poetry had exhausted their purposes, and that new manners of writing might enable new types of societal thinking. Which was all fine enough until you asked what ends they thought they would achieve by writing in a way that fewer and fewer people could understand.

Alpha. We come back to the question of readership, but from the other side.

Omega. Exactly. While earlier you suggested that there is such surfeit of entertainment today that consumers of art would rather be doing something else than reading poetry, now it would appear that poets bear part of the blame, by taking their works out of the public eye to become difficult, incoherent, ponderous, and unpleasant. What, in the sphere of listening pleasure, is Arnold Schoenberg beside Michael Jackson! What are the onomatopoeias of F. T. Marinetti compared to the emotional appeals of Giacomo Leopardi?

Alpha. These questions cannot be answered at all without grappling more seriously with poetry's ends in the sense of objectives. There is no way to evaluate the relative merits of challenging or accessible art, of high or low culture, of rewarding or idle applications of mind without a very solid contextual understanding of just *what it is* that a Marinetti or a

Leopardi wants to do. Only by knowing that—and the determining conditions of those “wants”—can we understand the mechanisms at work in one manner of art or another. Is poetry *essentially* a restrictive, sophisticated, and elite enterprise, as the serial compositions of Schoenberg would appear to be? Or is that what it has become, and had to become, in a particular type of world, which casts it into a militant fringe? It was not always so, as we noted, with the sung songs and oral tales of a community all attuned to a bard. Or with the Athenians who collectively attended annual cycles of tragedy. Or with Dante’s *Comedy*, entirely told in the vulgar tongue—like an excellent film, if I can draw a comparison, which both appeases vast crowds and rivets the attention of scholars, who will teach that film for centuries to come. It depends on where poetry wants to be among all this, and where the commercial/communicative system allows it to be.

Omega. You’ve suggested it yourself: that want functions by way of allowance. The objectives of poetry are also marked by an acute perception of its end in the sense of its finite limit—the place where it bumps up against, and potentially dissolves into, and is undone by or disappears into, mere chatter and twitter. If the poetic use of language is dependent on its difference from everyday communication, its objective consists largely in accomplishing what ordinary language cannot. There where poetry ends—namely, in language resumed as usual, employed for practical aims—is where it conceives of its objectives, deciding what other uses to make of language. What you call the communicative system, the circumscription of poetry by a semantic or asemantic magma, negatively affects the ends of poetry—a challenge it seems especially to face now.

Alpha. In simpler times the discursive context outside poetry’s border was composed of equally clear disciplines like philosophy, theology, and science, which helped poetry’s own self-definition. Now its outside is, as you say, magmatic. It includes not only volatile signs in digital clouds, but also existential weights like sitting half the day in commuter traffic. I have a cousin who sends me poetry that he composes line by line on WhatsApp from his car jammed on Lungotevere.

Omega. But he might just as well play video games! If the objectives of poetry depend on what poetry is not, then we need to see its outside in specifically discursive terms, not traffic jams or urban alienation. Poetry reacts to those as well, to be sure, but to rise to the level of a linguistic art it must twist components and dimensions of language, reformulate the way the world comes across to the mind. Films do not have that dialectical identity, or novels either, or pieces of music. Novels and films tell stories—which we already do in everyday life, and with most of the same semantic strategies. Music orders sound, but not in contra-distinction to the sounds around us. Poetry instead uses one and the same form that is used by what-is-not-poetry, but with different strategies and different modes of organization. Its objectives are more specific and also more complicated than those of the other arts. Poetry, a strange form of conceptual language, shapes the content that is its medium.

Alpha. In their statements of poetics, some poets in this volume appear to agree. Several speak of the poetry as aiming to salvage what everyday language *ruins*: discursive originality, intellectual discovery, clarity, conceptual revelation, attunedness to what we might call mental ecology. They implicitly endorse your opposition between Stravinsky and Michael Jackson, disclosing a defensive bearing toward popular media, toward the mind-maiming twitter pervasive in communication today. They seem to update the high-modernist ambition of Mallarmé and Pound to purify the words of the tribe.

Omega. It was Schoenberg and not Stravinsky, though for the purposes of this argument you might as well say Soft Machine! Yes, that rebellion against the degradation of linguistic depth in and by means of the social media might even strike some politically minded critics as superior and elitist—certainly those who would never trade in the demotic realms of the novel for poetry. Yet even here there is some ambivalence. The same poets who defend the alternate zones of poetic expression do not always write in a style that different from the demotic. Take away the line breaks in their poems—the lineation of their verses on the page, which is the very gesture by which texts say, “I am a poem!”—and ask yourself how distinguishable they are from everyday prose. More poems than ever now seem to be formulated in the direct, unassuming idioms of common speakers. If you delineate, so to speak, the poems in the anthology, you get an interesting clue as to which texts embody poetry and which do not.

Alpha. Maybe that too is a symptom of the crisis that has evinced this volume—a symptom of the difficulty and embarrassment of writing poetry in an era that has little use for it. It causes poets to stammer and be self-conscious, perplexed about how to go about their business. With the breakdown of the aulic register one hundred years ago, one itinerary still open for poetry was to become the deep conscience of prose. Perverse and desacralizing as it may sound, poetry has in a sense always aspired to be the better conscience of prose. Dante, Petrarch, and Leopardi, for example, didn’t they work hard to give their words the ring of everyday speech? Poetry, after much reshuffling and labor, said W. B. Yeats, should sound like the spontaneous and impromptu thought of a moment.

Omega. Something in which only great poets succeed! (Some don’t even try, preferring to sound practiced.) To conquer a large audience you risk producing a poetry that is too prosaic, or no poetry at all. Real poetry achieves an astonishing confluence of sound and sense—some theorists call it a *dissonance* between sound and sense—a bond altogether missing in *verba* that *volant*, or words that dissolve into air unremarked. Many people who would never dream of buying a volume of poetry still want to be poets, believing it enough to jot down some feelings on paper (what paper! on their keyboard), as though poetry were an ur-form of “I-speak,” a manifesto of “my difference” and “my authenticity.” We all have a self crying out for acknowledgment.

Alpha. Many want to write poetry, but few to study it. Maybe because it has become ever harder to grasp how poetry works, even what poetry is, leave alone what it is trying to say. Most teachers and students prefer stories and explanatory theories. Poetry is too independent and internally controlled for that, too methodically unique an approach to understanding. We get more mileage from cultural studies, perceptions of disciplinary intersections and contradictions (predicated on the limitations of each), exposés of how we define ourselves as nations and genders. It is easier to find common denominators than grapple with atypical, individualized moves. The discipline of the humanities is served far better by big categories like “the immigrant” and “the mother.” Poetry requires a different and greater degree of attention, even willingness to lose one’s way. Its text courts autonomy. Its significance slips and slides.

Omega. That so-called autonomy of the text is given no credence at all anymore! It flies in the face of political rhetoric, implying the possibility of more freedom than we believe we have. Poems deal with abstract and amorphous conditions of being. Their depictions are only sketched, riddled with holes and semantically porous. It takes considerable empathy to jump into and decipher these adumbrations, and great leaps of dexterous intellect! At least with

novels and stories one can sit back and get a clear picture, like in the movies. There narrative meanings are reified in characters and quasi-real events. There the groundwork for understanding is almost fully laid.

Alpha. Indeed, when reading a poem it is exceedingly difficult to know what it all has to do with me! When you go to a movie you understand that you are going elsewhere (and usually the further away, the better). By some uncanny logic the author of a poem interpellates me *more* than the author of a novel or film, as if to say, “This has everything to do with you! You, who might think I am speaking about myself, I am speaking to *you*, and I request that you listen!” Now who wants to answer a perfect stranger?

Omega. Fewer and fewer people, I am afraid. Yet they certainly include the critics and poets in this volume. Whether analyzing Sereni, Pascoli, or Boccaccio, whether relating them to Seamus Heaney or William Carlos Williams, whether speaking of texts they have written or those of Amelia Rosselli, they find that this perfect stranger is already inside the *I*—and not just out there, in the resoundingly strange world, or in the language with which they unlock this strangeness.

Alpha. Well let’s then give them their voice. Let’s see where it leads.