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Daniel Leary

Poetic Amusement
Raymond P. Hammond
Athanata Arts, Ltd.
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136 pages; paper, $14.95

"I have never yet met a man who was quite awake. How could I have looked him in the face?"

"I looked at my face in the mirror and saw Open Admissions."

The first line is from *Walden* (1854). I was 15 when it woke me, and I felt a chill and—and what?—an imaginative stretch? The second line is my very own. It is from an exercise in a poetry course I observed and participated in while evaluating new teachers at CCNY. I was 45 and had lost my way. The difference between the two lines is what Raymond P. Hammond's book is about. Henry David Thoreau is touched by the Muse and what imagination is. In the second line, I was into my Open Admissions failure and not wanting to openly admit it. Hammond makes a persuasive, unsettling case that contemporary American poetry has become as institutionally deluded as I was in the seventies, that American literary instruction has become the standardized, academically sponsored product of-by-for democratic mediocrity. The American Poetic Muse may not be dead, but she's got the throat clearing of a nervous versifier.

There's hope! A champion has arrived. You won't believe me, but it's on the back cover of *Poetic Amusement*. Raymond P. Hammond guards the Statue of Liberty as "a law enforcement officer" by day—I'm not kidding—and guards the American Muse by night as Editor of *The New York Quarterly*, a literary journal. And in his book, he guards the Muse—energetically and persuasively marshalling impressive material in her defense. If that dedication extends to his day job, I can only say that anybody who blows up the Statue of Liberty is in big trouble. I come away from the book with my jaw ajar, thinking Hammond a personified oxymoron—passive/aggressive, contemporaneously traditional and patriotically un-American. Before we get to the good stuff, I best polish off reviewer's chores.

The title? Smarter ones have guessed it already. Amusement. That initial "A" prefix negates "Muse." Hammond is at verses that lack the Muse, lack inspiration, verses passing themselves off as poetry. It's a playful etymology, the only whimsy in this straightforward book. As I muse on it, the title is straightforward too, since uninspired verse slithers around boredom by being amusing or bemusing—being entertainment or a puzzlement—in short, a way of killing time.

While we're tidying up, add another hat to Hammond's juggling act: the cop/editor was also a graduate student at NYU, writing this book as his thesis while pursuing an MA. The thesis was completed in 2000 and cites no material after 1999. Don't let that put you off. It's not written in dissertationese, and it's not old hat but twirling perkily into our computerized pixilation. It says a great deal about Hammond that he elected for an MA rather than an MFA. There was a sacrifice involved. We're talking about security. The MFA is a terminal degree equivalent to a PhD in matters of academic evaluation and employment and can be awarded—according to a disgruntled English department chair—after two years of relentless "poetry" writing. I should correct myself: yes, the book is about what poetry is, but equally it's about the MFA and how it undermines poetry. Hammond, this editor-of-a-student, realized what was and is happening and began to blow his policeman's whistle.

What is happening is dubbed "po' biz" in college circles. Yes, you've guessed this one too. Hammond calls the whole MFA boondoggle "the poetry industry" and claims that

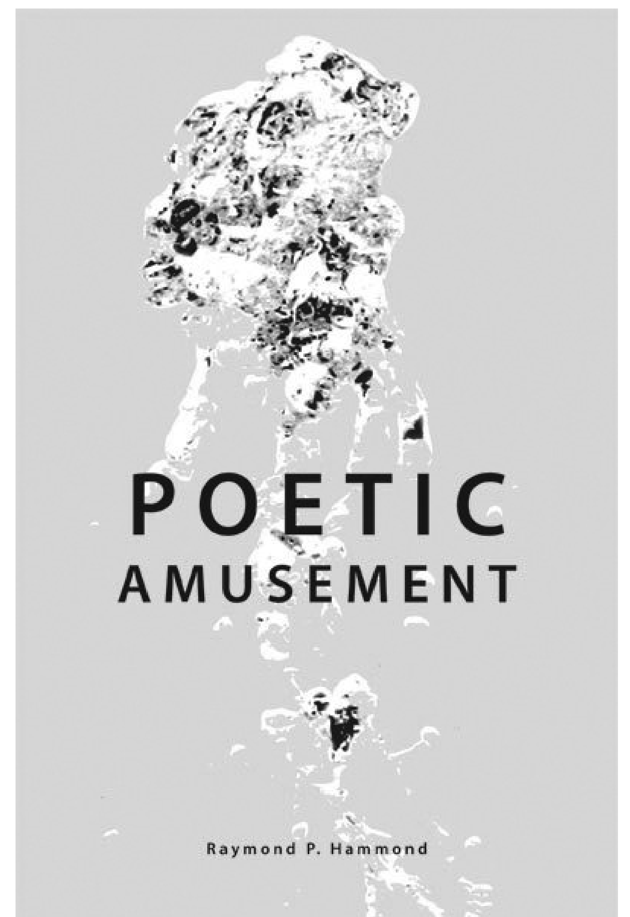
> conformity is the name of the game if one wants to excel.... Therefore, one learns to write like other contemporary American poets in order to win contests, because the contests are judged by those same contemporary American poets. These students also conform because they need to complete their MFA in order to compete in the job market. Tied in with this completing the MFA is the need, on a weekly basis to produce a poem for review in the workshop.... The university, then, becomes the legitimizing aspect for the poet's work.

The matriculated students, sorcerer's apprentices all, further conform to the po' biz as they become teachers of classes that gratifyingly over-enroll—gratifying to teachers and administrators—to produce more weekly poetry weakly, thus generating more teachers, etc., etc. The result? The academic cesspools overflow, meaning that there is no room left for new appointees—certainly no tenured lines—even if their versified efforts bob up in po' biz journals relentlessly. The MFA is indeed terminal and raises the question: is American poetry in the same terminal cesspool?

Hammond makes a persuasive, unsettling case that contemporary American poetry has become as institutionally deluded.

This academic po' biz overflow took me by surprise as I read about it in Hammond's little but very important book. In my beginning paragraph—check it out—is my end. Back in the seventies, I gave the poetry-writing teacher a rave evaluation. I would have accepted "amusement" straight in describing class goings-on, but I recall using "refreshing," refreshing for me certainly, a burnt-out case enjoying students enjoying the work/play of making paddy/waddy verses—more importantly, enjoying the teacher's bringing in a real poem to see how John Donne handled it and students on the brink of experiencing what a chilling expanding a poem is—allusive-elusive-delusive-never-conclusive. I realize now that the teacher was violating po' biz if the rules had ossified already. She was—as the theory goes—discouraging her students by exposing them to excellence. What I saw were students challenged as they saw how serious was their fun. Alright, alright, probably not all of them.

Indulge me for a paragraph while I make an instructive parallel. Four years ago, I enrolled in a beginner's drawing class, and in doing a final assignment, I astonished myself by sketching what I saw



in a mirror—a mirror again!—producing an image that many agreed looked recognizably like me. I was proud, delighted with my achievement as were most of the others with their self-images. We knew more about perspective, proportion, shading, knew more about what a real artist can sometimes achieve, knew a bit of how she achieved it, and knew that in our present state, we were nowhere near doing so. We had no intention of giving an art class or seeking an agent to pass us off as the new millennium's Pablo Picasso, the likes of, God help us, Julian Schnabel.

Now, the good stuff, the oxymoronic Hammond's three-way championing of the Muse.

Passive/Aggressive. I am not concerned with Hammond's psychic condition, just describing the strategy and tactics he takes in his book. He is there and not there as others confront the po' biz that he finds destructive to teachers, to their students, and to poetry in America. He uses the term "meta-criticism" in the preface to describe his wide historical approach that avoids specific literary examples while denigrating the impact of our contemporary poetic practices. However distanced he is in theory, he detests the po' biz and says as much in his own words, but in at least 40 percent of the book, our hero humbly steps aside. He lets recognized poets and critics, contemporaries as well as voices from the past, be heard on what a poem is and what must be present for it to be written. What is surprising is how well his tactics work. Our ears are not bent by an arrogant unknown but persuaded by a living tradition. Like a few good teachers I've experienced, he's both a sage on stage and a guide along side. He weaves the quotations smoothly and persuasively. Not till the end, when I read his list of "Works Consulted"—well over a hundred—and riffled through the index, did I appreciate how he assembled such a variety and made them one voice with his own voice intertwined. In the index, those cited nine times or more are Sylvia Beach, Charles Bukowski, T.S. Eliot, Donald Hall, Denise Levertov, J. D. McClatchy, Ezra Pound, Rainer Maria Rilke, and throw in the most-quoted of the critics: Dionysius Longinus, Edmund Wilson, and Harold Bloom. In the text, the citations are not a series of clippings, not quotations strung together. His 90 pages of exposition become a symposium on the nature, the value, the mystery of poetry, i.e., the Muse.

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Innovative Traditionalist. Again recall the opening paragraph. Hammond weaves the traditionalist T.S. Eliot with the path-blazing critic Harold Bloom. With both of them in mind, he innovates, or perhaps I should say reinstitutes, an approach to poetry writing that takes us back to classroom I sat in 35 years ago. Eliot, in a timeless essay of 1917, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," tells us that poetry—that literature—is a living organism, that when a poet—I mean a *poet*—creates, he engages in a form of magic realism, capturing the present and changing the past: Lear's five iambic tolling "Never"s become more—more livable?, containable?, understandable? By a psychic milometer in the listener's consciousness when Donne challenges death, when Dylan Thomas commands, begs his father to hold on for another breath. Hammond combines this ongoing creative immortality with Bloom's insight into creative despair, that the poet must always live with death, with his knowledge that it has all been done: "The covert subject of most poetry for the last three centuries has been the anxiety of influence, each poet's fear that no proper work remains for him to perform." I've penciled in the margin "beautifully put" alongside a passage from Seamus Heaney that Hammond approvingly quotes. It conveys the battle that writing poetry is and underscores what Hammond/Heaney want from an ideal poetry-writing class:

> What is involved, after all, is the replacement of literary excellence derived from modes of expression originally taken to be canonical and unquestionable. Writers have to start out as readers, and before they put pen to paper, even the most disaffected of them will have internalized the norms and forms of the tradition from which they wish to secede.

Un-American Patriot. "Po' biz": even the term itself in its shoddy, showbiz, throw-awayness, its corrupt familiarity, is a public acknowledgment that the groves of academe have set up shop in the market place, have become part of a cynically taxless plutocracy with mediocrity for all. My reading of po' biz may be somewhat between the lines, but "mediocre" or some variations of the word must occur in this book at least four score and seven times. I will say this in Raymond P. Hammond's defense before the recently reconvened House Committee, that he is in good company. From Alexis de Tocqueville who was a qualified admirer of America near its beginning to Jonathan Franzen's musings about Freedom's end, there have been many who saw the seeds of decay in its median, consumer mediocrity.

Hammond does not dream the American dream. He does not pretend with the rest of us that all men are equal, all potential poets, painters, posers, million-billion-trillion-aires.

> A democracy's ability to thrive depends upon a large middle class. It also depends upon the rule of the majority. Both of these factors create a dependence upon the median. From strip malls to Mickey Mouse, our society is one in which a middle class and resultant ambivalence toward the arts flourishes. Most poetry written today reflects this mediocrity.

My one reservation about this un-American declaration is the exclusive attack on the middle class. According to economists, if this ever-so profitable recession for banks and businesses and their sidekick politicians continues, there will soon be no middle class. Why not put some of the blame on the uneducated wealthy: the products of our business schools, our technical institutes, for that matter our colleges of the humanities that award MFA degrees to the readably unread? Consumerism "consumed by that which it was nourished by": why only yesterday Thanksgiving was consumerized into the day before Black Friday adventing into White Xmas.

Let's end with the poets. Here's Wordsworth, two hundred and three years ago, in one of those poems MFA candidates are taught to avoid:

> The world is too much with us; late and soon,
> Getting and spending, we lay waste our
> powers:
> Little we see in Nature that is ours;
> We have given our hearts away, a sordid
> boon!

Those powers wasted, hearts discarded, are what would have allowed the best to aspire beyond the world. That's why Hammond is a patriot as well as being outrageously un-American. He's calling us beyond mediocrity. You can summon the "power" as soul or imagination or muse, Muse—and I'm winging it now—and the Muse exists only when an imagination, a heart, a soul, reaches beyond consciousness to something on the verge of being apprehended. Robert Browning gave words to what I've been groping for since Thoreau's opening line, when Browning has his Andrea del Sarto, who never quite stretched far enough, settling as he did for a handful of gold and a twirl of girl, Browning has him sigh, "Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp, / Or what's a heaven for?"

For quite a while now, at Canisius College, Syracuse University, Bowling Green State University, Fordham University, City College of New York, La Université de Paris, Daniel Leary has been demonstrating and encouraging having a poem by heart.

Serpent Curve

Stephanie Rauschenbusch

What's Left
Susan Sindall
Cherry Grove Collections
http://www.cherry-grove.com
80 pages; paper, $18.00

Susan Sindall has been writing, reading, and publishing her poems for a long time, and as an editor of *Heliotrope* has also encouraged other poets to publish. More recently, she has studied with Ellen Bryant Voigt at Warren Wilson College's MFA poetry program.

Her newest book, *What's Left*, is a tremendous achievement—a sort of reckoning up of all that she has experienced, sensed, observed, and remembered in her entire life and of all that's lost or left behind. There are many themes in this book, and they interweave gracefully with each other. Among them is music—as in "From Brahms' Letter Thanking Robert Schumann":

> Tenderness, you see, trembles at the edges
> of everything. Water slips over rocks
> at the inlet, enlarging the pebbles
> through the water's tender moving.
>
> Your hands, poised above the keyboard—
> your nerves' tricky fires on the piano keys:
> those sparks, their tortures: we know them…
>
> In Italy, for instance, as I watched Clara
> reach for the ripe figs; how gently
> she cupped each scrotum : those sacks,
> fleshy, yellow, and seed-filled—
> just seeing them generates the notes.

Here we have brilliant shoptalk among musicians about where notes of music arise—from tenderness, from seeing water move over stones, from watching a woman handle and eat figs so sexual they are likened to testicles. This is an "ars poetica" but also a metaphysical discussion about geology and geography, about water and its meanings, about stones and their meanings, a discussion which appears in many other poems in this beautifully crafted book. From "Gros Ventre Valley," we read this stanza:

> Water writes its own calligraphy.
> Water gathers rocks, hugs boulders
> to its sides, spreads them
> grandly in a long serpent curve,
> the hem of the water's skirt.

So we find here the geological "serpent curve" echoed throughout the book—introduced actually in the first poem, "After," in which

> she sees
> them dangling everywhere, loops
> tangled in the branches, heads
> or tails, indecipherable….

The snake appears even in "Akhmatova's Fountain House" in which the poet descries a boa constrictor (in a photo?) suffocating a rabbit. Snakes begin to seem objective correlatives, or even symbols, for inspiration, as they were in Stanley Kunitz's poem about his Provincetown garden.

What's Left *is a tremendous achievement.*

But to go back to "Gros Ventre Valley." How many poets could reckon with death as baldly as in the couplet, "Not much between me and death. / Not enough years left"? This is another leitmotif of the book—death's approach and its meaning in the midst of life. There are several wonderful elegaic poems dedicated to the poet's mother and father—who are curiously both seen as under water. In "Voices," "the great pike, enormous curve of pisces, / smiles my father's smile." In "Offshore," the poet realizes when her mother speaks out loud to her,

> You must have been beside me for months
> beside me swimming, as our fingers

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