
In the preface to this collection, “Poetry and History: Finding ‘What Will Suffice,’” I show how Czeslaw Milosz’s “Dedication” and Jorie Graham’s “Guantánamo” embody the virtues of philosophical meditation and the moral imagination to create a unique poetry of witness. These poems also provide American poets with an example of how they can regain the trust of an apathetic general reading audience.

*Tinder for the Bathhouses* is a collection of poems in which I use the moral imagination to indirectly bear witness to events as far ranging as the Holocaust and the Iraq War. Using the family as a foundation, I show how historical narratives can provide a poet with the tools to think about larger metaphysical questions that poetry can raise, such as the nature of beauty and the purpose of art.
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by

Bredt Bredthauer
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PART I

POETRY AND HISTORY:

FINDING “WHAT WILL SUFFICE”
While many postmodern poems eschew sincerity and candor in favor of sarcasm and irony, Czeslaw Milosz’s “Dedication” and Jorie Graham’s “Guantánamo” provide a welcome respite from this attitude. The process of writing poetry allows these authors to bear witness to the Holocaust and Guantánamo Bay Detention Center respectively without relying on didacticism or sentimentality. Neither Milosz nor Graham attempts to deceive or mislead the reader. Rather, each of them creates a candid dialogue with his or her audience using an affirmative alternative to counter the lethargy and malaise that have become so prevalent. Furthermore, both of these individuals transform the contemporary lyric poem into a socially responsible form of literature. In this essay, I argue that “Dedication” and “Guantánamo” employ the concepts of philosophical witness and moral imagination to create this type of unique literary space. I also argue that employing these concepts allows each of these poets to achieve a meaningful connection with a certain category of readers, which in turn supplies American poets with viable examples of how they can regain the trust of an increasingly apathetic general reading audience.

Confronted by the supposed decline of historical awareness in contemporary American poetry, we, as readers and critics, can examine the work of Milosz and Graham to understand how modern poets can create a positive alternative to offset the tendency toward pessimism and isolationism evident in more postmodern poets. Although postmodern techniques can be valuable when dealing with the inability of language to address certain issues, as shown by Graham’s earlier work, these techniques often create more confusion than clarification. Thus, when Milosz and Graham avoid exploiting the
techniques of postmodernism—disjunction, irony, confusion, indeterminacy, deconstruction, and apathy—they do so to engage the reader constructively (Nealon and Giroux 130). Utilizing ideas of the American poet Wallace Stevens and the Polish poet Alexander Wat, I examine how Milosz and Graham make use of specific historical events to engage their readers in this way. The process of writing allows each of them to meditate on the larger metaphysical questions that such events raise, including those about the nature of existence and the purpose of poetry. This process also helps them enact societal change through poetry and find a possible solution to the cyclical nature of violence.

If poetry is not only about concentrated language and beautiful imagery, but also about the problems of observation and interpretation, as Stevens and Wat propose, then applying John Paul Lederach’s theory of the moral imagination to “Dedication” and “Guantánamo” shows that Milosz and Graham are concerned with more than just aesthetics and beauty. They are also concerned with transcending the hostility and aggression that arises in our society. As Lederach suggests, the moral imagination necessitates that an artist envision him or herself in a “complex web of relationships that includes our enemies” (5). Moreover, he claims that the capacity to generate the moral imagination helps an author mobilize readers by building a sense of community by connecting the past, present, and future in their work. Relating his theory to “Dedication and “Guantánamo” makes it easier to see that Milosz and Graham view the world not as a chaotic place but as a series of interconnected events. The appropriation of historical narratives and disposition to sincere dialogue, in contrast to irony and confusion, supplies
them with valuable tools to create a shared, evocative experience in their poems that counteracts the fear and resentment elicited by events like the Holocaust. In a world beset with global conflicts and competing factions, a world where hostility runs deeper than compassion, each of these authors uses affirmative alternatives to address the horrific details of subjects like the Holocaust and the Guantánamo Bay Detention Center. Both of these poets educate their readers in addition to underscoring empathy and compassion as stronger emotions than anger or despair.

As a Polish writer who lived through the harsh realities of the Holocaust and the Russian occupation, Milosz could easily have concentrated on the terrible details of these events in order to undermine the moral value of poetry. Poland lost over six million people during the war, nearly one-fifth of its population. Milosz responds to this loss by focusing on poetry’s moral seriousness and elevating this form of literature to a position of authority. Many of his books, such as *The Witness of Poetry*, help us recognize the inherent value of this artistic medium. When explaining the titling of this collection of essays, Milosz declares that we do not actually bear witness to poetry. It bears witness to us. He argues that poetry is a more reliable witness than journalism and acts as a “testimony to our epoch” (*Witness* 4). These assertions support the idea that poetry can actually allow an author to combine historical events with emotional reactions to educate the reader and indirectly pass judgment in ways that journalism cannot. Furthermore, the expressive power of poetry allows such an author to approach horrific subjects, such as the Holocaust, that might otherwise be deemed unsuitable for poems. It inverts the traditional agency between a poet and his or her poem. If the poem becomes the active
recipient of the language, as Milosz suggests, then the author is simply the vehicle through which these impressions occur. He or she becomes less important, as an individual, than either the poem or the subject it describes. Milosz’s ability to subordinate his own ego helps him reject self-indulgent poems in favor of those that employ the moral imagination.

Although this type of inversion may seem abstract, “Dedication” helps us negotiate through its possible contradictions. Addressed to “You whom I could not save” and dated “Warsaw 1945,” a date that signifies the official end of World War II, this poem is a requiem that commemorates the dead. By avoiding an ornamental style in favor of straightforwardness, Milosz structures his poem as a treatise concerning the necessity of poetry in the face of conflict and death. This conceptual pattern, which relies on an earnest discourse between the speaker of the poem and the reader, is most evident in the fourth stanza where Milosz poses the question:

What is poetry which does not save
Nations or people?
A connivance with official lies,
A song of drunkards whose throat will be cut in a moment,
Readings for sophomore girls. (Collected Poems 77)

Using straightforward language, Milosz claims that if poetry cannot save “nations or people,” then it becomes an exercise in political flattery or a form of entertainment for drunkards and sophomoric girls. These statements contain a certain level of irony, however, because they occur after the war has ended. While “Dedication” provides
Milosz with a way to counterbalance the feeling of survivor’s guilt by denouncing the kind of poem that trivializes or makes light of the cultural contexts in which it occurs, it also allows him to support the idea that poetry can provide a form of leisure or distraction for those whose “throat will be cut in a moment.” Although these ideas may seem contradictory, they actually complement each other in fascinating ways. For Milosz, content supersedes the process of undermining language or deconstructing the poem itself. The avoidance of postmodern techniques makes it easier for him to address the Holocaust and consequently offer a raison d’être for the act of writing itself. He views poetry as not only an extremely serious endeavor but also as a way to offer consolation to those facing death. In accordance with this attitude, he transforms “Dedication” into a form of ars poetica, or conscious expression of his ideas and emotions. Milosz does not utilize fragmentation or language that would estrange some of his readers. Instead, he creates a ground for compassion as an alternative to uncertainty.

Milosz’s use of compassion offers us the opportunity to recognize what unites us rather than what tears us apart. Although anger is a valuable emotion in response to the Holocaust, it creates a vague and imprecise relationship between the reader and the author. Sympathy for others’ suffering offers Milosz a stronger way to connect his readers. His inclusion of the dead presupposes the inclusion of the individuals who killed them, thus creating an intricate network of human beings that implicitly includes our enemies and our selves. As a premeditated act of witness, this poem has the capacity to provide spiritual nourishment to a population in need of faith: “When an entire community is struck by misfortune, for instance, the Nazi occupation of Poland, the
schism between the poet and the great human family disappears and poetry becomes as essential as bread” (Witness 31). In “Dedication” Milosz facilitates a frank discussion of the invasion and subsequent occupation of Poland, in addition to the Holocaust, by relying on genuine emotion as a constructive alternative to artifice. Even though he never explicitly mentions the word “Holocaust,” the conflict haunts the poem. Given the details contained in the postscript and Milosz’s Polish ancestry, the reader must use his or her intuition to understand how his biography indirectly informs the poem’s content.

Because Milosz relies on intuitive knowledge rather than didactic authorial statements, he imaginatively incorporates information while simultaneously transcending the physical violence of this event. Even as he acknowledges the loss of human life that occurred in World War II, he uses language as a means of moving forward, beyond the overwhelming sense of loss and grief. Figurative language supplies him with the tools to shift away from negation and toward reconciliation. In the final stanza of “Dedication,” Milosz employs a cultural anecdote to offer respect for the dead and closure to those who survived the war: “They used to pour millet on graves or poppy seeds / To feed the dead who would come disguised as birds. / I put this book here for you, who once lived / So that you should visit us no more” (Collected Poems 77). As a form of public declaration, Milosz writes this poem to spiritually sustain his readers. Although he directly addresses the dead, this technique is a device that allows him a way of addressing the living. His use of the pronoun “us” in the final line widens the focus of the poem from a personal dilemma into a societal one. The anecdote is effective because it exceeds the limits of the specific cultural situation and is applicable to a broad audience. Writing helps him make
amends, show remorse, and subsequently offer his readers hope for redemption from the
guilt that results from their complaisant attitudes during the war. He speaks to a universal
relationship that any of us, readers and critics alike, have to the loss of human life.

If a poet wants to bear witness earnestly to the world, as Milosz does, then he or
she must think about how specific historical events can lead to a meditation on their
deeper philosophical meaning. Such a poet explores the nature of reality while
simultaneously surrendering him or herself to something more valuable than mere
realistic details. He or she artistically creates an ideal world in the poem via a continuous
extinction of personality, an idea originally proposed by T.S. Eliot (266). By
emphasizing the importance of poetry as a way of understanding the complex
interrelationship between individuals, Milosz creates a social space in “Dedication”
where readers can meet and understand the inherent moral potential of poetry. Since the
fifties, Polish poets like Milosz have struggled to keep human beings in full view,
especially from a moral vantage point. One such poet, Alexander Wat, considered
himself a poet “not simply because he wrote poetry…but because he struggled toward
transcendence of our tragic fragmentation, because he had a radiant platonic dream of
being” (Hirsch 177). Wat’s allusion to the “platonic” elements of existence draws
attention to Milosz’s use of historical events as a stepping-stone to larger metaphysical
questions. Thus, when Milosz utilizes the Holocaust to ground “Dedication,” he does so
not only to memorialize the dead but also to act as a catalyst to help him move from
concrete particulars to philosophical ideas.
As a utilitarian tool, history makes us think about larger metaphysical questions such as the nature of existence and the rationale of writing poetry in times of war. Keeping this idea in mind, a reader must understand why Milosz searches for a truth that originates not only within the physical world but also one that exists outside the tangibles of reality. He educates readers concerning the importance of individuals and events and in turn, the way they lead to a comprehensive examination of our moral behavior. For that reason, the ability to imaginatively reflect on our actions is as important, if not more so, as the use of fragmentation through broken syntax and surreal imagery. Whereas postmodern techniques can be valuable when trying to break down language to display its inability to address specific events such as war, the use of clarity can help an author avoid confusion between him or herself and the reader.

Milosz’s clarity in “Dedication” encourages the reader to understand the necessity of thinking philosophically in contrast to other poets like Paul Celan, whose “Fugue of Death” highlights the far more private and masked category of lyric poem, a more normative type of contemporary lyric poem. As a Romanian-born Jew, Celan lost both parents during the German invasion of Czernowitz in 1941 (Birkerts 210). He responds to these events differently than Milosz. Rather than reproduce the world as cohesive and intact, Celan distances himself through the use of surreal imagery. Furthermore, Celan utilizes a disordered state of mind when dealing with the Holocaust, a state of mind in which one must wander far from home and experience a loss of memory to address this event. He fractures the poetic form, which replicates his view of this life as approximating broken shards of glass. Similar to the musical fugue for which it was
named, “Fugue of Death” repeats the theme of death with subtle variations accompanied by contrapuntal lines.

Although initially used to describe polyphonic music with very active and strongly differentiated parts, the term “contrapuntal” appropriately describes Celan’s poem, because he uses a counterpoint of uncertainty and confusion that balances the main point or melody. This technique reinforces his primary subject—death. Celan repeatedly alludes to the darker side of man’s nature and the bleak reality of the Holocaust by employing dreamlike images and disjointed ideas: “Black milk of daybreak we drink it at sundown / we drink it at noon in the morning we drink it at night / we drink and we drink it / we dig a grave in the breezes” (209). He juxtaposes elements of the subconscious mind with fantastic images that seem to contradict one another. Like the surrealists of the early 20th century, who tried to represent life with disjunctive leaps and startling images, Celan relies on paradoxical relationships, such as the use of “black” to modify “milk,” in addition to broken lines and incantatory repetition to describe the Holocaust. In doing so, he undermines the solidity of language to create a more ambiguous relationship with his readers. Because each image is dependent on the ability to understand Celan’s subconscious associations, the reader may easily miss the authorial experience of the poem.

While these authors’ dissimilar approaches offer distinct examples of how to write about the Holocaust, Milosz’s approach shows the value of compassion as a positive alternative to Celan’s ambiguity. To return to Lederach, who claims that we, as a society, should rely on unity when faced with individualization and find support in
others when faced with exclusion, Milosz’s “Dedication” employs these principles more visibly than Celan’s “Fugue of Death” (Lederach 15). Milosz builds a cohesive community in his poem in order to bring about constructive change. The creative process allows him to step out from behind the mystery of the unknown and address a specific historical event. Milosz writes “Dedication” as a way to help readers overcome the all too familiar landscape of violence. Moreover, he challenges readers to think about the complex implications of the Holocaust and, in turn, about the value of poetry as an inclusive endeavor—not an exclusive one. Confronted by the complex emotional reactions that this event elicits, Milosz emphasizes the need for unity as more significant than the need for individualization.

Because he uses poetry to unite us, Milosz makes the imagination a mediating presence between author and reader as well as between society and history. Thus, the interpretation of “Dedication” requires at least two individuals, one who observes then writes about events and one who interprets the work using the appropriate cultural and historical context. Although this idea is closely related to postmodernism, when applied to Milosz’s poem, such an idea allows us to see how the imagination acts as an intermediary between author and reader. As a bridge between the two, a poem like “Dedication” necessitates that an author, uses his imagination to construct the poem and that a reader uses his or her imagination to make meaning out of individual words and figurative language. In view of this, both Milosz and his readers must participate in the process of constructing meaning. There is no authority in reference to interpretation except the poem itself, which mediates through the process of imaginative engagement.
Moreover, this type of negotiation among poet, poem and reader requires a common set of linguistic standards.

As a common denominator, language helps Milosz make the transition between author and audience more smoothly than other poets like Celan. Many readers easily respond to his uncomplicated diction. In contrast, poems like Celan’s “Fugue of Death” lack this sense of semantic transparency. The connotations of each word in Celan’s work are not fixed but subjective. As an author, he relies on the readers’ implicit understanding of the implications of images like the “black milk of daybreak” rather than relying on explicit logic. In contrast, Milosz’s “Dedication,” supplies the more literal denotation of each word or phrase. Although they may metaphorically have deeper meanings, the words and the relationship between them remain more straightforward than Celan’s. Interpretation occurs due to the direct link between an image and its meaning, not on those that the reader must decipher using subconscious associations. Employing this technique helps Milosz build a community among lay readers and academics alike. He moves away from the more postmodern tendency toward indeterminacy, which helps him bridge the gulf between himself, as author, and innumerable categories of readers.

If the imagination includes but does not limit, then it allows an author like Milosz to engage his audience constructively, a technique that helps him create, or at least intervene, in the world, an idea also proposed by the American poet Wallace Stevens. The imagination permits a poet to fashion a work of literature that lets the reader view the world not as it is, but as it should be. Stevens’s assertions clarify Milosz’s belief that a poet has the power to enact social change. For Stevens, a poet’s role is to help people
understand the power of the imagination in their lives: he or she “creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it and gives life to the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it” (“The Noble Rider” 329). Since the act of naming things presupposes faith in our own existence, each poem creates a revelation by means of words. The imagination supplies an author with the tools to build connections among his or her readers and create a transformative social space that exists beyond the cycles of violence.

Stevens's use of the term “fictional” helps us understand Milosz’s choice to combine concrete, historical details with those of the more abstract, moral imagination. The ability to mix elements of the real with aspects of the invented facilitates the act of poetically disclosing historical details and emotional reactions to the reader. Milosz and Stevens both convey experiences using the imagination to help individuals make sense of the world in which they live. While the interdependence of reality and the imagination creates a certain amount of internal tension, poets can effectively embody this pressure through the process of writing. The ability to make emotions, such as survivor’s guilt, tangible and incorporate them into an organized poem, allows poets like Milosz to combine elements of a Romantic tradition with those of a Modernist tradition to mentally recreate the world in his poem. Relying on mutual assistance from the reader, he transforms the world from one focused on anger and confusion to one focused on hope as the primary reaction to events like the Holocaust.

Stevens provides yet another metaphor in “On Modern Poetry” that can help us understand Milosz’s rationale—the poet as metaphysician. The capacity to think
critically about the deeper questions that historical events raise causes Stevens to examine the fundamental principles and motivations concerning the significance of poetry. He suggests the need to “construct a new stage” where “the actor is/ A metaphysician in the dark” (*Collected Poems* 239). By referring to a poet as a metaphysician, Stevens implies that he or she must create a new type of philosophy concerned primarily with the nature of existence and its metaphysical foundation. By referring to the poet as an actor, he argues that such a poet must communicate these ideas to a specific audience via a necessary artistry or artifice. Stevens's use of a theatrical metaphor closely parallels that of the fictional metaphor. It indirectly alludes to Shakespeare’s famous speech in *As You Like It* where Jacques compares the world to a stage and people to actors (2.7.138). If life becomes symbolic of theatre and vice versa, then our entrances and our exits, our births and our deaths, are part of a larger historical drama.

Stevens’ comparison of poetry to drama shows that writing poems is like writing scripts that show the reader how to act in the context of an overarching collective performance, life. Similarly, authors like Milosz see poetry as a stage constructed to draw people out so they can observe and then take part in the larger peace-building drama. As a poet, he thinks about the world like Stevens’ “metaphysician in the dark.” When confronted by darkness, and by the uncertainty resulting from the Holocaust, he views the process of writing poems as Shakespeare may have viewed the process of writing plays. Just as the theater represents a microcosm of life for Shakespeare, the poem represents a microcosm of life for Milosz. As such, poetry allows an author like Milosz to question the nature of existence within the context of historical events.
Like Milosz, Jorie Graham employs the moral imagination in “Guantánamo” to think metaphorically about poetry as a miniature version of real life. She approaches the detention center much like Milosz approaches the Holocaust. Rather than resort to overt didactic statements, such as the allegations of abuse and torture of the detainees lodged against this camp by human rights activists and organizations, Graham indirectly addresses these issues using a specific set of poetic techniques. Whereas Milosz utilizes the postscript—“Warsaw 1945”—to show how “Dedication” obliquely refers to the Holocaust, Graham refers to “Guantánamo” more directly with her title. The reader understands the context without repeated mention of the topic. For example, Graham avoids directly identifying the guards or the forms of torture, like shackling prisoners to the floor that allegedly occurred at the facility (Eggan AO1). By not explicitly implicating specific individuals, she employs the repetition of inclusive gestures, such as the frequent use of plural possessive pronouns and adjectives, as one method to achieve this type of identification with the reader.

Although Graham frequently uses negatives such as “no,” “nobody,” and the prefix “un” in the first half of “Guantánamo,” she moves away from this form of exclusion in the second half of the poem. Her avoidance of the pronouns “you” and “yours” in preference for the more expansive “our” and “we” help her overcome the inclination toward isolation. By speaking on behalf of the reader, Graham suggests our complicity in relation to the Guantánamo Bay Detention Center and the accusations of torture. This type of address to the reader emphasizes the notion of identity as collective,
not based on the individualization of either the writer or the reader but based on our shared characteristics and social responsibilities:

The moon is colder
than you think. It is full of nothing like
this stillness of ours. We are trying not to be noticed. We are in stillness as if it were an other life we could slip into. In our skins we dazzle with nonexistence. It is a trick of course but sometimes it works. If it doesn’t we will be found, we will be made to scream and crawl. We will long to be forgiven. (Graham 10)

Though Graham refers to the moon using the personal pronoun “you,” she quickly makes the transition to “we,” which appears six times in the span of five lines. The word “our” also occurs twice. She shifts from the singular pronoun to the first person plural possessive to signify our shared responsibility concerning Guantánamo Bay. In so doing, she suggests that accountability does not only rest with the individual guards and prisoners incarcerated in this facility, but also with the writer and the reader. As a culture, we are collectively responsible for the events that occur in the detention center. By using this type of repetition throughout her poem, Graham further accentuates the idea that we share both the cultural and the moral liability.

In addition, she does not rely on didactic arguments. More accurately, she examines her own motives and rationale. For her, the process of writing is about more than aesthetics; it is also about the initial act of observation and the ensuing act of interpretation. Physical objects and their qualities are recognizable because of their
common relationship to abstract ideas. Similar to Milosz, Graham grounds her poem using historical events and concrete images, such as the moon, to access what Wat referred to as “platonic dream of being.” Acquired coldly, logically, and in graduated stages, the moon “conjures up metaphorical visions of beauty shining against the black backdrop of heaven… a symbol of knowledge acquired through reflection” (*Dictionary of Symbols* 672). Consequently, when Graham refers to the moon as in this poem, she gestures toward the need to obtain knowledge through logic and reflection. The frequent allusion to this image in “Guantánamo” acts as a guiding metaphor. The moon helps her envision the interrelationship between the tangible nature of reality and the mystery of the unknown, between the potential for violence and the transcendent nature of art.

Graham’s use of this image to end the poem enlarges the discussion from the physical detention center to a larger question that this facility elicits—the purpose of art in general and poetry specifically. The emphatic enjambment of this line emphasizes the importance of writing poetry when faced with the political implications of this place: “Moon, who will write / the final poem?” (Graham 10). Although the image of the moon invokes classic Romantic ideals of beauty, it also informs the concrete details to produce a poem concerned with neither reason nor revelation but a unique combination of the two. Because she refers to the moon as “colder than you think,” Graham underscores the dark possibilities associated with Guantánamo Bay. The reader cannot ignore the allegations of torture and mistreatment at this facility. While we may try to disregard the situation and “not to be noticed,” this reaction is a “trick.” While it sometimes works, when it does not, we will be forced to “scream and crawl,” effectively becoming the
individuals that we may otherwise refuse to acknowledge. In “Guantánamo” Graham examines the value of poetics and imaginative writing, not as a tangential to life, but as a way to proactively engage the reader. She empathizes with others’ suffering to create a ground for compassion.

Graham’s ability to imaginatively disclose information through intuition and figurative language closely parallels Milosz’s techniques in “Dedication.” She grounds “Guantánamo” with historical details then transforms this lyric into an *ars poetica* wherein she offers her own *raison d’être* regarding the nature of poetry. Using traditional poetic techniques—internal rhyme, enjambment and negative space—Graham juxtaposes concrete observations with philosophical meditations. She thinks about the intersection between the imagination and the mind, between art and reality. She ends her poem with the image of the moon the way Milosz similarly ends “Dedication” with the image of the millet. Whereas he concludes by scattering words across graves to appease the dead, Graham concludes like a bride who must confirm her marriage to this event: “You [the moon] are asking me to lose myself. / In this overflowing of my eye, / I do (10). The idea of marriage closely parallels the process of making a poem. Graham marries art and reality by mixing elements of the real with those of the imagined. By doing so, she is able to create a poem that addresses the volatile subject of Guantánamo Bay. She does not distance herself by undermining the stability of perspective through indirection but tries to enlighten and emotionally connect with her reader. Furthermore, Graham justifies poetry’s ability to make a difference in the world, ending “Guantánamo” with a tone of optimism when confronted by violence.
Graham’s candid public declaration reflects Lederach’s characterization of the moral imagination. Her disposition to dialogue displays a need to create a community in the poem as opposed to emphasizing the postmodern tendency toward isolation. Faced with exclusion, she finds support in others. This inclination to imaginatively identify with her enemies through the creative act helps Graham transcend the landscape of hostility, as Lederach advocates (15). She constructively engages her readers to build a peaceful solution to the problem by juxtaposing phrases like “trigger finger,” “lockup” and “counter-resistant coercive interrogation techniques,” with those of a more elemental quality like moon (Graham 10). The mixture of abstractions with tangible images allows Graham to allude to a larger, more complex interrelationship between these images and the abstract ideas to which they allude, wherein the images themselves become the body of an abstract idea. Though poets cannot explicitly refer to the platonic ideals referred to by Wat, they can indirectly allude to these concepts using grammatical constructions and emotionally resonant imagery.

Unlike Milosz and Graham, who provide an affirmative alternative to offset the more postmodern attitudes of irony and doubt, many contemporary American poets have remained largely mute and inactive when confronted by the issues that define their generation. Faced with events such as the war in Iraq and the United States’ contentious involvement in the Middle East, Central and South American countries, many poets have adopted Oscar Wilde’s motto of art for art’s sake. In today’s world, this view of art has become like an oft-repeated mantra used by modern authors to separate themselves from the larger social order. Individuals like Milosz and Graham, however, show how
contemporary poets can tackle notable historical topics in a simple yet frank manner. More than a beautiful arrangement of words, poems like “Dedication” and “Guantánamo” act as way to interpret the world using art. They remind us that philosophical witness and moral imagination can coexist and complement one another. To rely on the exclusion of the other creates a static poetic landscape. By combining the two, Milosz and Graham show they can collaborate to engender innovation. The ability to appropriate existing models and theoretical constructs from within the tradition, while remaining open to modernization and improvement, to everyday images and common diction, lets a poet recover the trust of what has become an apathetic general reading audience.

If American poetry’s sense of historical awareness is truly declining, then both of these authors provide viable examples that modern poets can emulate. For Milosz and Graham, poetry remains a wellspring of solace and support. It can address important metaphysical and philosophical questions, while simultaneously providing us with a way of dealing with the mutilated world. Although Milosz is a Polish poet by birth, he addresses issues in a way that American poets can imitate and modify. By continually confronting our own experiences and juxtaposing them with the past, American poets can create a ground for what Milosz referred to as “universal compassion” (Witness 97). If human reason is in fact beautiful and invincible, as he argues, then poetry can help an author make meaning out of our world while providing the reader with beauty as well as knowledge. Moreover, poetry offers a solution to the interpretative problem of how to address specific historical events. Because poetry can provide individuals with the tools to intervene in the world like a “cast of characters” in an “unnegotiable drama,” in the
words of Graham, these poems show us how to find what will suffice. As a public declaration of our ideas and emotions, poetry exists at the edge of an abyss. It exists in the liminal space between what an author can explicitly say and what a reader must implicitly understand. It is an ongoing process of listening and making, a ground for humility and transcendence.

The ability to observe and then think about the underlying significance of incidents like the Holocaust and places like the Guantánamo Bay Detention Center, offer both Milosz and Graham the opportunity to elevate poetry to a position of authority. In “Dedication” and “Guantánamo,” each of these authors concentrates on poetry’s moral seriousness. As a result, they supply American poets with two distinct examples of how to find a solution to the cycles of violence and brutality. Faced with the death of six million people, Milosz meditates on the underlying principles of writing poetry: “What surrounds us, here and now, is not guaranteed. It could just as well not exist—and so man constructs poetry out of the remnants found in the ruins” (Witness 97). As such, poetry must tell the truth about our suffering, even as it seeks to mobilize the reader in the pursuit of peace. Poets must, for this reason, constructively engage the reader then teach him or her how to view life not as merely an empty shell but as an interrelated group of individuals, as a collective human family that must work together to build a new world from the remnants they find in the ruins.
Works Cited


PART II
TINDER FOR THE
BATHHOUSES
Pilgrimage to Bowery Creek

My father flicks ashes across the table
that acts as a barrier between us.
He drinks a fifth of gin.
It’s Sunday and the snow is melting.
Moonlight multiplies everything it touches.

My mother moves among the corning dishes.
She smells of lysol mixed with sweat. Reads
about a rabbi who recites psalms outside a bullet-
scarred seminary in Israel. Reads about the funeral
of eight religious students. Fingers
her rosary beads and begins to cry.

Outside this room, a river rises and recedes.
It separates sand from soil and slowly erodes
the edges of its bank. All winter, it extends
beyond the point of breaking and searches
for a new vessel that will contain
the violent surges of water.

It moves without thinking. Has no mind.
No feelings. And yet, the water is colder
than bone. It burns our hands and reminds
us of a time before we were human.

Inside this room, father coughs into a paper
cup. He reaches into the pocket of his jeans
for a knife to cut the words from the paper
and paste them on the wall.
They look like a family portrait

hanging next to a calendar that tells us:
in this house time does not exist.
There are no clocks to remind us
of how quickly we forget. Do you see?

Fog crawls across the dark surface of water.
We blow into our hands to warm them.
Hold our breath and wait for the sour heat of gin to fill our stomach.

I imagine our roots grow deeper than words. They extend beyond this world to another where the mind submits to nothing. It moves like water.
Some Observations on Jazz

Although it was hot beneath the sheets of smoke, I listened to the staggered notes cascading from his tenor sax.

They were sharp enough to draw blood. Raw enough to rise with half-valve glissandos and full-bodied clarion blows. Drenched in sweat,

bent beneath the burden of sound, an imperfect gesture that anticipates the unknown, I bared my arms

and plunged into the past. Into a time when jazz drove dancers to their feet, pulsating rhythms inflamed the mind

like opiates, and musicians died from pneumonia brought on by an excess of bootleg gin.

In that moment, I learned that music begins with air. A war between what makes us human and what divine. Through recognition I heard

the body’s ancient beat. A ritual that takes over long after hunger is satisfied.

It is the same in every language. One must descend in order to emerge.
Elegy for Hala Hassan

Perhaps you saw her father
shout cowards into the camera
or her mother forage through two lorries
standing idle outside the Hilla Hospital.

To suffering there is a limit; to fearing, none.
Too stunned to talk, I watched the screen
and thought of the dead, the only ones
who know what the end of war looks like.

I thought of my father and his father
whose forearm bears the numbered tag
from a summer spent in Chelmo
unloading trains of human cargo
kept secret from the world.
Because those things we fear are indefinable,
knowledge is changeable. An argument
without an end. Held together
by a catalogue of forgotten events
written by survivors to remember
that the past is always present
and happy countries have no history.

Only snippets of film filtered for television
like myths in which all men agree to believe.
Revision

To compensate for our lack of wings,  
the fauvists discovered the beauty in light  
and the dormant possibility of color.

Torn between the paint and what is painted,  
consumed by the purity of cadmium and cobalt,  
they proclaimed an end to six hundred years of memory

and allowed the eye to emerge  
from behind the primitive  
darkness like a wild beast

armed with tubes of paint  
and thick pastiche. Matisse knew.  
Having penetrated the raw profanity

of night and allowed a river of red  
light to pour, almost palpably,  
from an open window at daybreak.

What is poetry if not painting  
edowed with sound and color  
transformed by solitude.

The ear catches what the eye cannot.  
It transforms the sweating body  
into spirit and illuminates the darkness

like a fierce declaration. An act of faith  
that allows the imagination to transcend  
the mind as beauty transcends a work of art.
Corn Whiskey

We were listening to Ma Rainey’s *Barrelhouse Blues* when my father disappeared into the blazing sun of a northern Mississippi cornfield.

Hidden among piles of brown powdered earth and empty bottles of Caroline Style corn whiskey,

his brown eyes looked like sequins sewn onto black velvet.

Sleeping beneath an old oak tree whose leaves broke the light, he listened to us play

fast westerns on tailgate trombones and steel string guitars. Listened to us sing of a world beyond the world

in a language without words. Our hands were stained with dirt as we cried

*Ride, Harry, Ride* and lowered his body into a dream filled with piano

players and crude cabarets that serve whiskey directly from the barrel.
Because your body cannot be buried,
I left your corpse like lumber in the street.

I poured kerosene across each limb
and lit the mound of flesh with a match.

Even now, twenty years later,
the terror of smoke obscures

each threadbare moment.
My body aches with anticipation.

It knows nothing of beauty’s judgment.
Absolution. Or release. Madness was swift.

Her boot heels beat
the drums of bridges.

Snow and ash.

Perhaps I should have been a sailor.
The sea accepts without anger,

scars our hands with fishhooks.
Hardens our bones with salt.
And the Ocean Takes a Wife

Overcome by the odor of sandalwood and dead fish tangled in your hair,
I knelt on the ocean and searched for starfish embedded in the sand.

I waded into the marble of your sea
and listened to the waves, thunderous sonatas in c-major. It was marvelous.

Your cheap green dress ran like a river.
I became a doll filled with indifferent silence.
In love with shadows. Overcome by castles and children that smell suspiciously,

I watched your skin slip
beneath the gulf stream current
and listened to the rhythms thrown haphazardly into the sun. I waited

for the waves to break the ocean open.
To spill your burning grains of sand.
Listening to Ligeti in November

My wife once held our baby’s body above boiling pots and butcher knives. He clung to the purple bruises of her breasts while a shroud of steam hid their faces. I remember that winter vividly.

Raccoons took refuge beneath the porch, the river’s skin froze three feet thick and a snowman tried to walk away from beneath the window. For years,

I believed it must have been an accident. How could a woman listen to Ligeti’s *Le Grand Macabre* then dream of swallowing a piano made of glass. And how could an overture of car horns make her wash the germs from an infant’s skin with scalding water. Sometimes, I find myself staring at the walls of our kitchen and wondering how I missed the signs. Each brushstroke betrayed an obsessive need for order. Two thousand days of painting, then nothing. She disappeared

into the absence of color. Into a place where music tasted sour and life sounded more like a cacophony of competing noises than a concerto composed of two contrasting voices.
Dear Larry,

My mother lives in a small room decorated with plastic plants and velvet pictures of Jesus. Her husband is dead. She smokes cigarettes and writes his name into the margins of your book. Carefully tears out the pages and watches winter stars turn ink to ash. I don’t know why. She never liked poetry before he died. Now she can’t stop reading.

Larry, I’m running out of patience. On this earth, things go wrong. The city smells like a cemetery in morning. Flowers threaten us with petals like an image of the heart that opens every spring to spread its seed. Larry, I don’t know what to do. Some days, I find my mother sitting outside a gas station on the edge of El Paso. She refuses to move from the bucket seat of my father’s old Ford Falcon. Although she stares into the rear view mirror for hours, nothing alive moves for hundreds of miles.

She tells me the stucco arches of the station look like a cathedral dome. And sometimes she says their plaster faces mock her. Larry, please help us. I still remember when you said that some things are impossible on earth and that’s why people make poems about the dead. But Larry, being human is difficult and divinity is impossible when our fathers are dead and our mothers are bipolar. Do not deceive yourself, this is not an exercise in form. At the end of life, words have the flatness of a fresco and art is not sacred. It cannot resurrect the dead.
from their graves or relieve the relentless pressure of memory. The fates are never kind. They must rethread the spindle and begin to sew time and time again. Larry,

every day as I make coffee, eat little and fall asleep alone, I think of you. Of how some things are possible when poetry that begins with silence, must end with the familiarity of breathing.
Orpheus of 125th Street

Infatuated by Hughes and Harlem’s dark mystery, by the syncopated rhythms that echo through the pool halls and parlors of Lennox Avenue,

I imagine walking into the Savoy, a place where race was nothing compared to the crescendos of Cab and the Duke.

Holding the heart of Georgia in my hand I remember a time when Shorty George Snowden was king of the crystal cut chandeliers and burnished maple floors,

when Chick Webb played nonstop solos on a twenty-eight inch drum hidden among tables of root-de-toot beer and Schweppes ginger ale.

Standing outside the Apollo, serving barbecue and black-eyed peas to the Broadway stars and Brooklyn teens, I realize that history is the process of burial and resurrection, the process of being and becoming more than the superfluous luxury of the living or the half-forgotten myths that ground our gods to dust.
Electrified by Illusion
- after Arthur Rimbaud

Hospital shifts marry me to unrefined visions of steel and unwashed linen.

Can you hear the sound of my hallucinations (o saisons!) They separate the breakdowns from dancing boys and circles and cycles of breakdowns.

I am an addict uncomfortable with French. Ideas eaten by all things human.

The insistence of prehistoric times to harvest unique angles makes Idaho completely contemporary.

Let the demigods speak of states of being. Guerillas dream in color too.

Let the sun sing.
Omit me.
Dear Charles,

I

Did you read the recent obituary about the butcher. I believe you knew him. He had a wooden slab where bones are broken and a bloody apron. I lived above his shop for years.

He was a kind man who sang Ave Maria while cutting slabs of meat. He kept a bucket of blood beneath the counter. Wore a belly guard made of Kevlar and carried paring knives in his vest. It’s been years since I’ve seen him but I can still hear his baritone voice rise above the taxicabs and buses.

II

Last night, the newscaster said that all along Alameda Avenue, headless mothers are shaking their babies. The president has declared peace and Mrs. Russell wants to shoot the dog. Her son goes to Berkeley. Her daughter has overcome the beatings.

Meanwhile, David, from next door, is trying to break through a crawdad’s mud fortress with a chicken neck tied to a piece of nylon string.

And I dreamed I was a rooster who ripped the chameleon’s tongue from its roots.
But Charlie, do we really live in fragments. Is it possible that you are still waiting for me to thank you for the package of sausage casings. Why deny it?

It was such a wonderful gift. I intended to write you a letter but poetry, much like butchery, is more traditional work.

I know nothing about economic theory or philosophy yet I can hear the sound of food grade saws in the streets. It’s quite loud.

It wakes me every night. But I suppose its better the less one knows about the process of making sausage.
Birthday

We are children of the night
held in check by fire and stone,
molded by a savior who
called himself our god,
tried to tie our souls in knots
and make us each atone.

But he is not our father
and thus we feel no fear
to break into his body.
To steal that bitter bread.

To drink his blood from dirty cups.
The straight gin of despair.
When my brother’s body arrived in the mail, stuffed in the belly of a plane and labeled as freight, I wrote return to sender across the top of his box and left it outside the nearest post office.

He would have loved the irony. Eight weeks ago he sent me a pair of postcards. The first showed a photo of six soldiers drinking bottles of coke on the courthouse lawn, while the second displayed a faded print of Guernica. The back of each card contained the same sequence of words: how can art compete with birds who want to rip out our eyes so we can’t see beyond the hollows of war and what it does to beauty? Two months since his death but I’ve kept his cards taped above my bathroom mirror.

Every morning, I gaze into the black eyes of Picasso’s dismembered soldier and try to see into the teenage boy who stares back at me. His severed arm holds a toothbrush. A wide-eyed bull stands above his grieving mother. In a world more sepia than sunlight, I see a child holding human skulls.

Perhaps they are my teeth. I can’t tell where each picture ends, where my reflection begins. I raise my eyes to a flower growing from the shattered fragments of a sword.

I lower them to the soldiers drinking on the lawn. Buzzards have begun to gather above their heads while a color guard of garbage trucks drive slowly down the street, collecting withered onion cores,
apple skins and poems denouncing the latest war. 
Calmly, I think of my brother’s body and tear
his postcards from the mirror before offering
them as food to the angry birds.
On Waking

I began to cut off the fingers of my right hand.  
First the pinkie.  Then the thumb.  
And then the entire arm.

There are no words to describe         
the beautiful yet familiar feeling       
of being exposed.  Of hearing           
bones break like bubble wrap

and watching as blood congeals         
in the porcelain sink.  Please forgive me.  
I would have preferred to write a poem  
about spring rain and rye grass

but I am drained.  Hungry.  
I cannot rage like moonshine           
through Kentucky nights.               
I am no phoenix

who makes love to arsonists.  I am just a man    
who can cut into my body to show that each drop  
of ink contains another man who must wash       
the dirt from beneath his nails.
Tinder for the Bathhouses  
- after David Wevill 

I 

Every man carries a scandal in his heart. A song that cannot be sung. A wound that must be written into the margins of his life. In a time of mock funerals, your death was real. It broke apart my seed like afterbirth.

As a boy, I was consumed by the downfall of the world, so you took me to the National Gallery in London. A shrine to the muses. A building that held thousands of eyes.

You showed me the Portrait of Savonarola and explained how he was tortured, then taken to the Piazza della Signoria on the day of his death, ritually stripped of clerical garments and hung in chains from a huge wooden cross. You spoke of a fire that flowered beneath him, how his remains mixed with brushwood to make the flames last longer. Here lies the crescendo. I learned what Prometheus never expected. That fire can consume an Egyptian fleet at Alexandria, a library that held all knowledge of the world. Fire devours everything. From lewd pictures and books of poetry to Savonarola, a man who burned Boticellis in a bonfire before his own arrest and execution. Before he was hung beneath angels who unrolled the blank scroll of Florence, a city that slept beneath billows of smoke.

Long after his ashes scattered across the Arno, I listened to your voice and discovered
I could wear it like a thick wool coat against the cruelness of cold nights.

I tried to memorize each calloused ridge of your hands so that I could hide them in the hallway closet between Superman comics and toy soldier figurines. This is how the mind shifts: it transforms plastic into pens that make nominal incisions in the skin so that our fathers live between the flowered pages of books. Your death was real. It showed me that each time the music changes we must listen for a different key. Must calibrate our ears to understand the subtle alterations in pitch and tone. Every word becomes more than a single sheet of music that repeats again and again. It becomes a scale that never ends where it began. And so I listen to your words and let them resonate: a current must pass through a conductor to be heard.

II

295 Bowery Street has been torn down. Now we live in Avalon Chrystie development, one of the largest condos downtown.
Even here, fire intrudes.
It lights up the culverts where we built
a flotilla of a hundred paper ships

No one can remember Big Mose, the eight-foot tall fireman who vanquished gangs
with an uprooted tree. Now there was a man
who could swim the Hudson in just two strokes.

No one remembers the hookers
and hot-corn girls of the 1840s.
Or John McGurk, who opened a saloon
known as suicide hall that survived

over one hundred years. As a result, I stand here
on Chatham Square with my pair of older brothers
and listen to the sparrow’s dull song.
Fling the ashes of your body

across the muddy surface of the water.
Watch them sink below the sulfuric acids,
oil and grease that line the drainage ditch
where we launched those paper ships

over twenty years ago. In a sad way,
I am trying to tell you that my weary
limbs can no longer bear your heavy stone.

III

Before night comes, I think of you burning
like Savonarola. I watch my brothers
mix your ashes with the deadwood of our lives.
Ma Rainey. McGurk’s Saloon. Bowery Creek

An entire fleet of paper boats
once sailed past Tammany Hall.
Past twenty-five thousand bums
who lived outside the butcher
shops on the corner of Park and James.
A place where graffiti skulls talk on cell phones
and ancient distilleries line the streets.
Because every man carries a scandal,

I wore the pungence of my father’s body
in my own, a smell
the earth could never have invented.
I kept his vinyl albums and empty bottles of whiskey.

I kept his faded print of Matisse’s violinist
that hung on the unclean wall of our kitchen
to remember each Botticelli that was burned
because our vanity far outweighed our pride.

So now, as I stand on the southeast corner
of Chatham Square with my pair of brothers
and scatter your ashes across the dirty water,
I finally see your end as a myth

in which all knowledge
of the ancient world is extinguished:
fire was stolen from the gods
only to be given to three sad men.

Three men who stand outside Hadley Hall
and launch one final ship into the muddy ditch
before starting to slowly sing the words.
Here lies your crescendo.
Silence

Stranded on your dusty shelf
among the prophets of smoke and jazz,

I wait like a plaster bust of madness
in search of a forgotten life.

Clocks stand idle. Tin cans empty,
Light wanders through our windows.

I curve to catch the milk of dawn.

Who will ferry me across the flames
now that all have forsaken me.

Must I crawl across the floor
with crutches, held aloft

like the petals of a rose
or the points of a cross.
A Secret Between Father and Son

I

In the end, I doubt my father will remember the details of his life. The onset of puberty. A bus trip across the Canadian border.

Infidelity. It’s 5:00 PM and he wants to speak. Wants to ignore the slow hardening of his bones

and let the tongue shape each word like a potter’s wasp. Years from now, no one will remember the coarseness of his knuckles or the cruelness of his beginnings. When seen as part of a story, his suffering will be bearable. No one will remember that is body resembled an orange whose rind had withered in the sun or that his breath smelled more like vinegar than wine. I imagine this is how gods must die. Surrounded by mercury and steel. Asleep beneath sterile linen. Barely able to breathe.

II

It’s morning now. I can hear my mother frying catfish in the kitchen, arranging empty beer bottles around the table while my sister plays solitaire. Slowly searching for an ace in a deck of twos. Her fingers look like fish bones imprisoned in the animal of her body. Windows stretch inward to see
the cinders that still smolder.
In the end, angels are a hoax.

We will forget the details of your life.
I sit down beside my sister. My mother
hands me a fork and knife. We eat in silence.
Memory

By spring, you will be dead.
Buried beneath oaks that stand
like sentries outside our window.

I never expected to survive
your absence. My body
more fleeting than water, grows
to seed and sleep beneath the bloom.

They say that morning wears a shroud
Forgives the night her infidelities.
Borrows the moon to light
the blue-eyed grass.

But the world is not divine. So dense.
So impenetrable. It waits to decompose.
To return. Misshapen by the hard
midwestern frost. Out of this, we rise.

Make room for another to emerge
from the dark aperture. Slowly.
Before the spirit must surrender
to the body’s cold fire.

The heat of flesh
undoes what no smoke
of the mind sufficed to do.