To Be: 2B (1999)

What Is Poetry to Do?

Reginald Gibbons

1. Poetry can not do what poets do not do.

2. We work among the possibilities of language. We present or explore, or evoke or enact-in-language or—in both senses of the word—we "represent," and we also invent, aspects and possibilities of being and of language. We transform lived experience, whether active or contemplative, whether outward or inward, into articulations that both present and explore what we know (and what language does or might do). We live, in the moments of writing, a transformation of being into language. We discover what we did not previously know but can reach for, in the process of writing, what we can reach the very edge of—even if poetry, and language, have never been to that edge. Especially if they have not. (For language, too, knows some things that we users of it do not know; and language, too, does not yet know some things that we users of language are discovering and articulating for the first time.)

Presenting, exploring, discovering, inventing, are related to each other as aspects of an awareness of the complex process of our being-in-language, of which poetry is one especially intense, meaning-crammed mode and result. This process includes not only the representation of

Poezja nie jest w stanie dokonać tego, czego nie dokonają sami poeci – zauważa Reginald Gibbons, amerykański poeta, tłumacz, eseista, wieloletni redaktor pisma literackiego „TriQuarterly". Poezja jest stanem „bycia-w-języku", stanem interpretacji tego, co wiadome lub niewiadome, lub podświadome, bo wszak czujemy i pamiętamy, zanim odnajdujemy słowa na opisanie własnych przeżyć. Kwestią zasadniczą nie jest jednak to, co poeci powinni robić, lecz to, dlaczego milczą – gdy milczą. Kim są ci, którzy milczą? Octavio Paz powiadał, że pisanie – poprzez swoją intymność – jest aktem jednostki, że wobec tego poeta nie powinien przemawiać w niczyim imieniu, tylko swoim. Byli i są jednak tacy, jak Pablo Neruda, César Vallejo czy Gabriela Mistral, którzy zabierają głos w imieniu zbiorowości. Jak ujął to Milan Kundera, rolą pisarza jest utrwalanie tego, co inni – na przykład działający na rzecz różnych biurokracji – pragną wymazać ze społecznej pamięci. Czesław Miłosz podkreślał, że w takich okolicznościach należy unikać sentymentalizmu i pisać tak, by najpełniej dokumentować cierpienie. Czasami jest ono – jak w przypadku Anny Achmatowej – udziałem samego autora. Kiedy pisarze wybierają milczenie, czasami ich postawa współdziała z kłamstwem i obojętnością „systemu"; czasami milczą, gdyż czują, że nie wypada pisać (na przykład o niezrozumiałych „okrucieństwach Boga"). Niekiedy jako pisarze milczymy – stwierdza Gibbons – aby innym ludziom zaoszczędzić bólu, który byłby rezultatem pisarskiego ekshibicjonizmu. Czasami milczymy ze względu na tych, których nie chcemy zdradzić naszym słowem. Czasami nawet nie wiemy, co przemilczeliśmy, ulegając wpływom zbyt silnym i zbyt bliskim, aby mieć do nich dystans: trendom kultury literackiej, ideologii czy ekonomii, które poprzez różne media dyktują nam, w co wierzyć, obracając nasze manifesty intelektualne w konsumpcyjny nawyk. Najbardziej ulotna w swojej sile jest jednak cisza, która we własnych manifestacjach – w odpowiedzi na paraliżujące nas przebłyski świadomości – kwestionuje samą istotę naszego bytu. Tak więc i zgiełk, i cisza, prawie wszystko „spiskuje" przeciw poecie. Grace Paley powtarzała swoim uczniom, żeby mówili to, czego nikt nie chce słyszeć; Hélène Cixous – żeby pisać tak, jak gdybyśmy pisali w ostatnim dniu życia. Poezja – konkluduje Gibbons – dzięki swojej marginalnej pozycji rynkowej pozostaje obszarem wolności. Wciąż jest zabawą, ale także środkiem przeciw zapomnieniu, artystyczną fałdą w języku, testem na uczucia, sposobem godzenia sprzeczności, śpiewania bez muzyki, modlenia się bez bogów.

what is known (even if only in the poem does it become newly known) but also the articulation of not-knowing. Not knowing, in the sense of not knowing yet; and also not knowing as a state of being, a knowing of nothing. Often we go in both directions at once, representing what we would like to know but don't yet know that we know, or rather representing what we can't know without articulating it, and even representing that which we do not know with full consciousness even after we have articulated, shaped, transformed it (but which a reader can know in ways somewhat different, somewhat more fully, than the writer's knowing).

We think and feel and observe and reflect and remember and imagine, a little of which we do even before we can find the words, and thus before we find not just words but also sentences or fragments of sentences, and some of which we can do only *in* words and sentences while we are in the midst of the process of articulating, shaping, transforming.

Given all *that*, in its slipperiness and knottiness and elusiveness and sometimes dumb leadenness—as the fleeting thought, the deeply buried or elusively subtle feeling, escapes us; as we almost can think the unthinkable; as we are frightened by figuring what has only just now suddenly seemed to threaten us as we figure it—I am interested not only in what poetry is to do, and in what poets do. I am also interested in what poets do not do. That is, I am interested in the occasions when poets are silent. And interested in who it is who is silent.

(And interested in whose censure or deafness urges or enforces our silence.)

3. Those who do not write at all may of course speak, but they do not always speak. And they have no opportunity to disseminate their articulations for others to *read*—that is, for others to re-read, ponder, work through, challenge (as they bring their own imagination and lived experience to the act of reading), preserve, weigh as evidence or testimony or accomplishment. The thought and feeling of those non-writing persons (and I don't mean professional blatherers like politicans or human television puppets) must find a response in those who are nearby. To all others, they remain silent, anonymous. Their witness is intimate and usually lost; their articulations, however memorable, do not redound, except when occasionally they are given the chance, and they take it, to speak to a meeting or a courtroom or a congregation or a demonstration.

When we as writers consider their condition, their experience, their knowledge, and their silence in the literally silent but crowded, signifying realm of the written, some of us are led to try to "speak" (that is, to write) on their behalf. Others of us are led to feel that speaking in their name is just what we should not do. Octavio Paz has written:

> A writer should not and cannot speak for others. A writer is not the mouthpiece of a tribe, a group, or a government. A writer is the voice of a private awareness, a solitary voice. I don't mean, of course, that a writer is someone with no nationality, or with no ties to the soil or to the people. Each man and each woman is a child of a tradition and

of a language, a product of history. But the writer cannot speak in the name of anyone but himself. It is true, however, in some cases, that the language of a people speaks through the mouth of a poet. Those are exceptional moments that only occur once or twice every hundred years. The writer is not the representative, the deputy or the mouthpiece of a class, a country, or a church. Literature does not represent, it presents![1]

But however much a writer of Paz's generation may understandably and rightly feel that he must avoid any moral or emotional obligation to any collective, it's not so clear that this avoidance is a simple matter or a simple choice. For example, in *Trilce*, César Vallejo wrote poems of unimpeachable authenticity but also of great resistance to interpretation, on behalf of the family in which he had been a child, and effectively on behalf of innumerable persons who lived an Andean, mestizo, provincial, uneducated, laboring life. Pablo Neruda wrote more accessibly, more grandly, perhaps more movingly, and without doubt greatly—yet with lapses into less than convincing authenticity—about the ancient builders of Macchu Picchu. Both with and without irony (I think), Gabriela Mistral said, when awarded the Nobel Prize many decades ago, that the prize committee had perhaps decided finally to make an award on behalf of the women and the children. These poets, whose work Paz knew well, chose, and I cannot see any reason why they should be censured for choosing, to speak in the name of others.

Milan Kundera urged on us all the necessity of remembering, in our writing, what political leaders and structures, and their bureaucratic agents, were always trying to suppress and obliterate in the Communist states. (Have not government institutions in the capitalist countries, from the most powerful and even exalted federal entities to the local police department and city hall, been an exception to this suppressing and obliterating... only in degree, and not in kind?) Therefore we *must* at least sometimes speak for someone other than ourselves, and write of what is beyond our own personal experience, if only in order to keep alive a memory which for the sake of humanity we wish to share, in order to preserve the truth of a human experience that power or indifference wishes to forget. So that it will not be replaced by a calculated falsehood that has been disseminated with calculated effect *in order to* replace. Or obliterated by a general wishing to deny what has happened among us.

And Czesław Miłosz has written that when we do write on behalf of someone else, our responsibility is to avoid sentimentality and idealizing and to produce instead something truly adequate as a memorial to suffering which we ourselves did not endure and which few who have not endured it can fully grasp or understand. Kundera describes his sense of an intellectual responsibility, Miłosz his sense of an emotional one, and both, their sense of a responsibility to the true history of human beings.

Sometimes the suffering *is* the writer's own, but is also shared with others, as when Anna Akhmatova was asked, while standing at the Soviet prison gate in the endless vigil

---

[1] Octavio Paz, "From 'A Discourse on Literature and Publishing Today,'" tr. Ernest A. Johnson, Jr., in *Frank 15 Online*, http:www.gyoza.com/frank/html/08Paz.html, as downloaded on March 14, 1999.

for word of what had happened to those whom she loved, "Can you describe this?" and she answered, "I can," and she did—not only for herself but also for the sake of the woman who asked her and all the women who did not.

To choose to be silent about some things seems to be a giving up of any resistance to public and bureaucratic falsehood and indifference.

Thus sometimes in poetry, which is to say among poets, there is a noticeable silence about some of the things that we know have happened, over the last 5,000 years or so, to somebody else. Sometimes we poets, in certain social and cultural and political circumstances, seem to feel that we have no permission to talk about those things. We might know, for instance, and even in our own day hear shouted from a pulpit that it is righteously recorded that God did smite[2] the enemies of Israel. But we do not say much about the horrifying mercilessness, the persecution, the genocide, that God's agents say He sponsored. The smitten were not permitted to speak to posterity, much less to write, what they felt at being so treated, by God and His proxies. However belatedly, might someone say a word on behalf of the smitten?

4. (Miłosz says that to write as well as one can about such things is what we owe those on whose behalf we sometimes speak. For the subject matter of our work can not excuse poor writing. But to this I must add that when we say "to write as well as one can," we are inescapably invoking an idea of shared standards of what artistic excellence is, even though many of us disagree on how to describe and rank such standards, and one of the things we often remain silent about is where those standards come from and therefore what authority they have, in the end. They come neither from God nor from nowhere. They don't necessarily represent the height of human achievement or ideals just because we happen to be advocating them now, in our lifetimes, in our own cultures, in our literary gatherings and periodicals and prize juries.)

5. We may also maintain a silence, one by one, about our own lived and imagined experience, and our own ideals, fears, and desires. This silence has various motives. I do not deprecate the compunction that arises out of concern for others—as when a poet, like some fiction writers, frets over how to disguise the identity and experience of those who have compelled themselves on his or her imagination as models. The poet may not wish to cause emotional pain to someone who might feel that he or she, even obliquely portrayed, has been betrayed by the poem as a public exhibition of private life, or—assuming the poet has not in fact written in bad faith—who cannot grasp or does not care that the transformation is everything, the shape of the *work*, the feeling achieved in it, whatever and whoever the model for it was. (So we say.) Thus we poets may feel we don't have

[2] smite: O.E.D.: "strike with the hand, a weapon, etc.; hit, beat. Also (chiefly in Biblical use), strike down, kill, slay, destroy; afflict, punish." One thinks, most recently, of Serbian police in villages in Kosovo. But there have been and will be many more exemplars of smiting sponsored by a being or nonbeing that cannot afterward be held accountable, nor rescue the dead from death, nor the wounded from their pain.

permission to write about a human experience that we know intimately, even though it compels our attention and our response. Sometimes, on the other hand, we are seen as heartless for having cared more about the effect of the poem than about what a reader might think of the persons whom the poem apparently describes. (Was anyone in Vallejo's family mortified to have been described, in *Trilce*, as so impoverished, as having been beaten so hard by life?) Ours might be a necessary heartlessness (if heartlessness is what it is), if it serves a truth that serves some worthy human ideal. We also know that having no scruple at all about the feelings of others does not in itself make one anything of a writer, and may make one only a prurient and even hostile tattle. No more than a great, even heartbreaking subject, this particular kind of cold scrutiny and representation of other persons can neither produce good writing nor excuse bad writing.

Yet yielding to criticism that is moralizing, even from a person who feels betrayed by the writer in this way, would be acceding to a pressure to be silent. I think of the infamous letter received by William Goyen from his mother, after the publication in a tiny literary journal of some excerpts from what would become his first novel, one of the most extraordinary American works, *The House of Breath*—a novel not only rife with a new saying of feeling, memory, and sexuality which until its publication had not yet been articulated, but also shaped into a new novelistic form. In 1948, when Goyen had already worked on the novel for several years, his mother, having read the excerpts, sent him a long diatribe in which she said, among other things: "if that is the kind of literature you are going to write, I hope you never succeed (and you won't) [...] My hopes are all gone, for I can see your type of writing now [... and] I don't want to ever read anything else you write."[3] Despite the wounding he felt at this reproach, because he had been and remained so close to her, he persisted, through years that put additional disheartening obstacles in his path, in saying what she did not wish to hear, and the novel was published in 1950. About what more he may have remained silent, we cannot know.

6. But if for all such reasons at least some of our silence is a due or an understandable silence, a yielding to a pressure from nearby that is too much for us, there is also among us a curious absence of the words, the telling, the going to the edge of what can be said, that might have been expected of us. For because of the way our feelings function in us, and our memories, and our ability to think, our failure to write can be stubborn, and we conquer it only by great effort.

Unwittingly and unavoidably, each of us suppresses first of all what in each is unconscious. However, we know that writing carries with it, to the page, countless unconscious feelings, ideas, images, and implications that remain as if unseen by the person who put them there, even after he or she has written them down and reread them. A certain very deliberate dedication in the poet to studying the draft can raise some of its unconscious content to consciousness, and thus open new paths for the poem. But not so many poets

[3] William Goyen, *Selected Letters from a Writer's Life*, ed. Robert Phillips (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 107-8.

are so dedicated, or feel that they should be. Anyway, however opaque such meanings may remain to the writer, they will now be somewhat apparent to the reader who has a certain sort of attentiveness.

7. We also exclude from our poems some of what we do *consciously* know, what is in our lived experience, what we could see if we wished. But we don't necessarily wish. After all, we exist inside ideologies and also within webs of personal illusions and necessary lies. We are brought up, within the family, the church, the school and the nation, to feel that it is desirable to think, feel and do certain things, and undesirable to think, feel and do others. Desirable to say this, and undesirable to say that. (Not that the simple desire to say unpleasant things will in itself make much of a writer. And how many writers have mistaken the easy discomforting produced by mere bad manners for the productive unease when the true agents, forces, and motives of suffering are named? After all, manners change, therefore to offend them becomes a harder task, while cruelty and profit and power remain unphased, excited, determined, and sometimes amused.) Even if from an early age the writer was one of those persons who was willing to say the unpleasant thing, and perhaps even liked the effect created in others when they heard it, the writer too has been formed inside the dynamic of action and reaction based on a complaisant consensus about what is pleasant and permitted, and what is not.

The din of those public pronouncements that are lies, emanating from all forms of power, is the very strength of ideologies—in newspapers and women's magazines and men's magazines and every sort of print medium and all the electronic media, from the corporations in New York and Los Angeles and from state television in Belgrade and Beijing, from governments and other institutions. We undergo a never-ending inescapable indoctrination in what we supposedly should feel and think and believe, and in what we shouldn't, while at the same time we are being encouraged, and often convinced, to think of ourselves as completely free to do, or at least buy, whatever we wish. We substitute buying for doing (and thinking and saying); we are urged to substitute buying what we almost believe will confer pleasure or status for a resistance to buying in general—it's all a kind of forced metonymy in the realm of democratically available consumption. "Forced" because buying is *not* saying, nor is saying buying. These acts have nothing to do with each other, except in the strange warp of thinking that has been produced among us over the last hundred and fifty years by the profit motive.

So psychological, social, cultural and political dimensions of our experience saturate us as we live and work and sleep and dream, but for one reason or another—sometimes having to do with those ideas or ideals of the *standards* by which good writing is judged—we don't necessarily wish to think about all that, much less labor (and it is unremitting labor for many of us), to get hold of it, to present and explore it, to resist. For whom would we do that, a part of us asks? Who wants to hear about it?

And I don't mean to say that these social dimensions of our experience are only the

ones that we easily recognize as something more than the purely psychological (if there is such a thing). These dimensions are apparent in the work of such outwardly unpolitical writers as Samuel Beckett or Alice Munro, and in such nimble presenters (and representers) and explorers of everyday life as Grace Paley, Patrick White, Ralph Ellison and Bruno Schulz. In very different ways, these dimensions of experience are explicitly named in the lines of some poets, but also lie in the very textures of the language of others, from Adrienne Rich or Aimé Césaire to Paul Celan or Wole Soyinka.

8. Most elusive, most like the Medusa in its power to silence us, is that articulation of or from our own being which calls our being into question, which in response to our instant of glimpsing it seems instantly to paralyze us in return; or seems as if to free us from our bodies with a frightening thoroughness, to free us from being itself, to let us loose to not be while still being. This moment has several aspects, as I'm trying to try to suggest, if it will let me do so—it may seem like being incorporated into immobile stoniness, or into nothingness, or into enlightenment, but in any case this moment leaves behind it no impulse to use words, no heart for it. No need for it. After it, a silence. The tongue, if nothing else, turns to stone.

9. Last, whatever, in our "private awareness," as Paz puts it, we decide to say and not say, or whatever decides to say us, as we say, there is yet another determinant of what we articulate and what remains unarticulated, and that is the structure of literary culture, which includes not only the standards by which those who tend to dominate public acknowledgment of serious writing judge it, but also the manner in which our books are published, distributed and sold, the public discourse about them, and the sustaining and circulation of journals and magazines. To say nothing of the growing substitution in libraries of expenditure on electronic media for expenditures on books. In our public institutions of the word and the book, the function of preserving the past seems to be somewhat at odds with the function of providing access to the new. The new will mostly win this contest, in our culture of media, rapid change, frequent and far travel, and global structures of finance, production, sales, and marketing.

10. Taking all this into account, I hope I won't be considered wrong if I contend that nearly everything conspires to push poets toward saying what is easier to say and what somebody would like to hear, and away from saying what is difficult or what nobody wants to hear, or what at least certain people don't want to hear. (I have been told that Grace Paley has often instructed writing workshops, "You must say what nobody wants to hear.") The structures of publishing, the nature of the human psyche, the dominance of this or that set of assumptions about literary standards, the situation of our lives amidst political, financial and institutional powers, and last but not least, the cohesion and mutual affinities—social, esthetic, even material—of this or that group of persons in positions

of influence, all work against our saying what nobody wants to hear—if by "nobody" we mean the persons and institutions I just mentioned.

Perhaps for the sake of liberating our imagination, for the sake of our sometime desire to break silences, Emily Dickinson urged us all to think of *ourselves* as nobody. Nobody, in this sense, *does* want to hear; nobody awaits our speaking. For similar reasons, Hélène Cixous explicitly says we must write as if we were writing on the last day of our lives. (That is—Dickinson might have added—writing to be read when, after our own death, we will be nobody, too.)

(All this doesn't necessarily mean that *only* that about which we have been silent is what we should write. We should write whatever we want. As Thomas McGrath said, when asked why, given his fierce radical political commitment, he also wrote tiny poems about wildflowers, "I want to take everything that comes! I'm very greedy that way."[5])

11. Thus, poetry can only do as we poets do. And at our best, anyway, we poets are inextricably caught in a problematic of, on the one hand, having an appetite for everything that comes and an impulse to speak of what has remained unspoken, and yet, on the other hand, of being subjected to pressures of many sorts, most of which we don't particularly want to be conscious of, or can't be conscious of, *not* to write about certain things, *not* to write in certain ways, not to write at all. Censure and deafness and threat and mere unpleasantness, which is amazingly powerful, crowd us from without, and suggest themselves from within.

12. I think of John Keats's beautiful ode to autumn, one of the last poems he wrote, in which he first presents a marvelous array of the exquisite beauty of all that is ready to be harvested—beauty of image and of language; then he portrays autumn as a goddess of the harvest, watching the cider ooze from the press as if it were the cider's *will* to do so, on its own. Finally, in the last of the three stanzas, the poem is somewhat sorrowful: "in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn / Among the river sallows." With pleasure in the naming, Keats names clouds and stubble-plains and lambs and hedge-crickets and birds. So why is this ending mournful? Is it only, as one standard American anthology footnotes it for students in our culture, because autumn is a time of death as well as plenitude?

Might it not also be because John Keats, whose family was working class, who was trained as a pharmacist, who could expect neither patrons nor acknowledgment of the kind that would provide him some leisure for writing, whose poems were savaged by reviewers, who by dint of extraordinary work and determination made himself into a poet and a thinker by fully realizing every ounce of spirit, giftedness and intelligence that he had, who knew first-hand what it was to live by one's everyday labor, to live in cramped and crowded rooms with few prospects of any better life for one's self or one's children, and who did not live long enough to have children or to find his way toward what he

[1] Thomas McGrath's statement is from the interview with the poet in *Thomas McGrath: Life and the Poem*, edited by Reginald Gibbons and Terrence Des Pres (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 99.

would have written as a mature human being—might it be because John Keats feels mournfulness at the end of his ode to autumn from having *chosen* not to mention (or "present," much less "represent"), not to speak in the name of, and in sympathy with, the men and women who had tilled the fields, planted and tended the crop and brought it in, leaving those stubble-fields behind, the men and women who, during the intense, physically exhausting days of the harvest, gathered it and stored it and celebrated it and preserved it, without owning much if any of it? Even Keats remained silent about something that we might have thought would have spoken to *him* especially, something which he, better than any of the great poets of his time, could have evoked—articulating, shaping and transforming, presenting and exploring the human experience of labor, which to this day remains mostly absent from the great poems (even though in this century there are more writers who approach it).

Further: might Keats have gone—in those superbly mellifluous lines, in which the language almost seems to seek out and find its own harmonies and echoes, its own path toward meaning—to the very edge of his own will and entered well within the will of the play of words? And then hesitated? Understandably? And chosen instead to realize poetic effects that he already knew how to achieve? Might he have stood in his imagination not only speechless on some unreal peak from which the Pacific Ocean could be seen in the early 1500s, but also where the mind-in-language comes suddenly not even to want a gorgeousness of language but to be the mind-before- or the mind-after-language, and the very beauty of the sounds of the words and of the rhythms and patterns and structures into which they are arranged and have arranged themselves and the thought that dances gracefully among them, to them, is precisely what in this moment seems the *opposite* of the greatest thing that might be accomplished in a poem? (Which, after all, is more intensely meaningful than any other instance of language.) The face of the goddess of the harvest is hidden behind her own long hair, and if we were to look on that beauty it would stop us as completely as Medusa because it is, is it?, a face with no features at all but only a shape of the light of September, passing and surpassing all our previous feeling of fullness and completion, silent in surpassing words while compellingly inviting them.

13. What is poetry to do...? Poetry may entertain, but it need not always, or even often, do so. Its purpose is not always to be likable. (For some reason, I feel this needs to be said more often in the United States than elsewhere.) The very marginal marketability of poetry is what keeps it free. And it requires neither troupe nor machinery, neither investments nor box seats, in order to be created and said aloud. Sometimes nowadays it may well be the substance of a brief startling video; but mostly it may still be kept hastily penciled on a scrap of paper.

Poetry is a dissent from oblivion. An artful wrinkle in language. A waking and lucid dreaming. A way of greeting time. A mode of witness and homage, a vehicle for paradox, a vessel for contradiction, a test, an assay, of feeling and of language, making most use of

the very sounds of what we say—a way of singing without music, praying without gods. A vision revealed to the ear. A peculiar, intense way to praise and censure, to curse, a ceremonious saying. It longs to stay a while with all sorts of elusive, ephemeral, ordinary moments, but often finds itself in the mouths of leisurely patricians of self-congratulation. It longs to move completely through to the other side of what it says, but often finds itself in the mouths of bound-up unthinking persons. It longs to gainsay ideologies, but often finds itself in the mouths of the unresisting. It resists.

Where feeling flows in a massive human tide, it eddies. Where attitudes and desires stampede toward the prize, it turns to one side and edges away.

It can be made to do blind work—as in anthems and marches and warsongs and jingles. It is sometimes sodden with perfumed brutality. It is not pure.

It is streaming in colored ribbons for the imaginations of children—all its wise and hoary devices born utterly new once more. It does not hate reason—to it, reason is another charming device. It does not care about truth—to it, charm is another truth. And where there is silence, it begins to whisper.

A threat of silence is around us on all sides—amidst the horrifying welter of mass media and machine noise, official lies, and general indifference, and within our being-in-language, as well; while an enabling silence is figured on our page as the white space around the poem. Silence invites us to think what we are asked not to think; silence invites us to speak even words that have never yet been spoken; yet silence also seals up the unsaid, the not-yet-said, because of a spoken or unmistakably implied "No." In those places where writers risk their freedom and lives and livelihood to say "yes," we see the courage that we who enjoy more favorable freedoms may convince ourselves that we ourselves don't need. But is it true that we don't need it? Against silence and out of silence (phrases from Susan Sontag and Muriel Rukeyser) we may offer a poem. Of what, in its odd, intense, beautiful, linguistically and formally overdetermined way, will it not speak?

Reginald Gibbons

Reginald Gibbons is an American poet, fiction writer, and translator. His numerous works include *Maybe It Was So* (1991), *Sweetbitter* (1994), *Sparrow: New and Selected Poems* (1997), and *Homage to Longshot O'Leary: Poems* (1999). He is Professor of English at Northwestern University.