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**M. Garber: Patronizing the Arts**

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# 1

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## THE PARADOX OF PATRONAGE

TIMON: *What have you there, my friend?*

PAINTER: *A piece of painting, which I do beseech  
Your lordship to accept. . . .*

TIMON: *I like your work,  
And you shall find I like it.*

—TIMON OF ATHENS

ARTISTS HAVE ALWAYS had patrons. From the time of Maecenas, a wealthy Etruscan noble who supported Virgil and Horace and was duly celebrated in their verse, to the Medicis and later the popes, and then to Isabella Stewart Gardner and the Guggenheim and MacArthur Foundations, rich sponsors have often supported painters, sculptors, and poets. And inevitably, these relationships have been loaded—fraught with over-, and underestimation, with pettiness as well as generosity, with disdain as well as desire.

The artist had the talent, and the patron the money. In some cases, though by no means all, the dynamic of the relationship involved forgetting this key and defining fact. Artists, who often have very little money, could occasionally live as if they were rich, or at least live *among* the rich, receive invitations to their parties, and be received at their city and country homes. And patrons, who have often, though by no means always, possessed considerable artistic vision and taste, could experience pleasure in a creative society of people and be made to feel that their place in the world might transcend the means by which they came to financial and social prominence. By mobilizing the fantasies that artists have about patrons, and vice versa, productive instances of patronage can be forged and precipitated.



For example, when he wanted to raise funds to rebuild Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, the American actor Sam Wanamaker put together a highly effective coalition of philanthropic socialites, actors, and British and American academics. Each was possessed of a quality or attribute lacking in, and admired by, the others—wealth, fame, charisma, gravitas.

A complicated and contradictory mixture of deep gratitude and powerful resentment is thus built into the dynamic of patronage. Which of these two will predominate in any given encounter between patron and protégé is never entirely predictable, although the volatility of their bond has been the stuff of many historical biographies and romanticizing films, such as the 1984 hit *Amadeus* and the 1988 French period piece *Camille Claudel* (featuring Gérard Depardieu as Auguste Rodin and Isabelle Adjani as his eponymous admirer/*amante*). Indeed, as we have already noted, the relationship between patron and artist often follows the psychic structure of a love affair, with attendant fantasies, appropriations, misunderstandings, and disappointments. The more disinterested this relationship appears, the greater is its capacity to surprise and disconcert one party or the other—or both.

The histories of words are often suggestive, and the history of “patron” is no exception. The word stems originally from the Latin *pater*, “father,” and the connections with, or analogies to, a system of patriarchy are not incidental but central. Many of the ambivalences of that familial power relation reemerge in the context of patronage. The Latin *patronus* means “protector of clients” (whether those clients were individuals, cities, or provinces); the “former master of a freedman or freedwoman”; and an “advocate or defender.” The English word “patron” quickly acquired the meaning of “one who takes under his favor and protection, or lends his influential support to advance the interests of, some person, cause, institution, art, or undertaking.”

A patron was once also a “donor,” who commissioned works of art, like altarpieces, for churches and other institutions. In recognition of this generosity, using the medieval and early modern versions of Photoshop, the artist carefully inserted

an image of the donor into the work of art: a donor kneeling in prayer at the foot of the cross, a donor in close proximity to a saint. Nicholas Rolin was the chancellor of the Duke of Burgundy, Philip the Good (from 1422 to 1457). He was fortunate enough to have lived in the time of Jan van Eyck and Rogier van de Weyden, court painters to Philip the Good, and so he is prominently on display in van Eyck's *Rolin Madonna* (where he kneels opposite the Virgin, wearing a gold brocade jacket trimmed with mink) and in van der Weyden's *Beaune Last Judgment*.

Medieval and Renaissance paintings and stained-glass windows regularly display such donors, dressed in the height of modern fashion, posing unselfconsciously (and without a hint of anachronism or blasphemy) in the same panels as naked saints and the crucifixion. In 1493 a guild of wealthy citizens and craftsmen from Haarlem in the Netherlands commissioned a sumptuous illuminated manuscript as a welcoming gift to a monastery, the Hermits of St. Augustine, who had undertaken to pray for the guild's members. The manuscript is a virtual "Who's Who of Haarlem," with donors depicted at the bottom of almost every page, kneeling in prayer next to saints or other religious figures.<sup>1</sup>

In centuries past, patrons were mentors, sponsors, and agents for the artists they took under their protection. The painter lived with the patron and tried to obtain commissions from the patron's friends. Artists were members of the household retinue, rather than godlike creative beings; sometimes they even wore livery, in order to indicate their dependent status. The baroque artist Andrea Sacchi entered the household of Cardinal Antonio Barberini in 1637 and was placed in a category with three slaves, a gardener, a dwarf, and an old nurse. In 1640 he was promoted, joining other pensioners like writers, poets, and secretaries. Jan van Eyck was *peintre de monseigneur* (court painter) in the household of Philip the Good, paid—according to the terms of his contract—not for his work itself but for his availability to do it. Anthony van Dyck was the court painter of Charles I. These were

patronage relationships of a kind that seldom exists now. There were, of course, variations on this pattern. Some artists worked exclusively for single, powerful patrons, while others, like their twenty- and twenty-first-century counterparts, might paint, and then exhibit, without knowing who would purchase their work. Transactions could be mediated by dealers or dilettantes, domestic or foreign—“but,” as Francis Haskell noted, “artists [in Baroque Italy] usually disliked the freedom of working for unknown admirers, and with a few notable exceptions exhibitions were assumed to be the last resort of the unemployed.”<sup>2</sup>

In the realm of literature, the patron emerged as an especially important figure with the rise of print culture. Indeed, it has been suggested that it would make more sense to list and catalogue early modern works by the names of their patrons than by the names of their authors, since patronage was a much more powerful system than authorship in that period, and the imprint of the patron’s interests on the collectivity of the work he or she sponsored might be more telling than any assessment of the author’s supposed subjectivity. Only with the development of the system of copyright, in the eighteenth century, did authorship really become the major factor in determining who “owned” a written work. This paradigm shift had far-reaching implications for literary patronage. The seventeenth-century poet and playwright Ben Jonson, famously sensitive on the question of his social place, expressed satisfaction at the way he was treated at Penshurst, the home of the Sidney family,

Where the same beer and bread, and self-same wine  
That is his lordship’s, shall be also mine.  
And I not fain to sit (as some this day  
At great men’s tables) and yet dine away.  
Here no man tells my cups; nor standing by  
A waiter, doth my gluttony envy; . . .  
Nor, when I take my lodging, need I pray  
For fire, or lights, or livery; all is there; . . . .  
(Jonson, “To Penshurst” [1616])

In this case the rather touchy poet felt, or wished to feel, like a guest rather than a servant in the house of his patron. But patronage was often less comfortable and more intrusive than the Penshurst ideal. Classic quotations on the topic are telling. We might compare the observation of the Painter in Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*—"When we for recompense have prais'd the vile, / It stains the glory in that happy verse / Which aptly sings the good"—with Francis Bacon's testy remark that "books (such as are worthy the name of books) ought to have no patrons but truth and reason." But in fact books in this period often *did* have patrons and dedicatees, and in many cases the favor of the patron was crucial to the economic survival of the writer.

Perhaps the most famous contretemps between patron and "patronized" in English letters was the public quarrel between Dr. Samuel Johnson and his supposed patron, Lord Chesterfield. Johnson had sought Chesterfield's assistance, without success, at a time when he was in deep financial need, and was hard at work on his pathbreaking *Dictionary of the English Language*. Chesterfield was completely unresponsive until, many years later, the dictionary at last appeared in print, at which point it was belatedly accompanied by Chesterfield's endorsement. Johnson's celebrated letter of rebuke, dated 1755, is a model of its kind:

My Lord:

I have been lately informed by the proprietor of the World that two Papers in which my Dictionary is recommended to the Public were written by your Lordship. To be so distinguished is an honour which, being very little accustomed to favours from the Great, I know not well how to receive, or in what terms to acknowledge. . . .

Seven years, My lord have now past since I waited in your outward Rooms or was repulsed from your Door, during which time I have been pushing on my work through difficulties of which it is useless to complain, and have brought it at last to the verge of Publication without one

Act of assistance, one word of encouragement, or one smile of favour. Such treatment I did not expect, for I never had a Patron before.

[. . .] Is not a Patron, My Lord, one who looks with unconcern on a Man struggling for Life in the water and when he has reached ground encumbers him with help. The notice which you have been pleased to take of my Labours, had it been early, had been kind; but it has been delayed till I am indifferent and cannot enjoy it, till I am solitary and cannot impart it, till I am known, and do not want it.

In Johnson's *Dictionary* itself the first definition under "patron" was equally to the point: "One who countenances, supports or protects. Commonly a wretch who supports with indolence, and is paid with flattery." It was after Johnson's experience with Chesterfield that he famously altered a couplet in his poem "The Vanity of Human Wishes." In the 1749 version of the poem, adapted from a satire of Juvenal, Johnson had catalogued a litany of woes, all concerned with the harshness of poverty:

There mark what ills the scholar's life assail,  
Toil, envy, want, the garret and the jail.

The penurious scholar worked, starved, competed with others for his livelihood, slept in an attic, might wind up in debtor's prison. But in 1755, after the spat regarding the *Dictionary's* patronage, he replaced the humble but anodyne "garret" with the far more pointed and personal "patron." Henceforth the list of grievances would read, uncompromisingly,

Toil, envy, want, the *patron* and the jail.

The fact that a patron could so readily be summed up as part of the problem, rather than presented as the solution to it, tells the whole story in brief—for Johnson's London, and for the ages.

Many recent writers, following Jürgen Habermas, have described the eighteenth century as a time of expansion of the

public sphere, with attendant pleasures and dangers. Nowhere was this clearer than in the changing market for art and literature. Thus, for example, in a study forthrightly titled *Painting for Money: The Visual Arts and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century England*, art historian David Solkin discusses “artists and writers about art who embraced the realities of a burgeoning market economy.” In this period, he notes, “for the first time in English history, paintings became an object of widespread capital investment; and alongside other cultural producers who contributed to an increasingly active trade in luxury goods, artists soon learned that many rules they had long accepted as absolute imperatives would have to give way to the higher laws of supply and demand.”<sup>3</sup> During the first half of the eighteenth century, painters continued to work for individual patrons on commission, as they had in previous centuries. However, a new mode of display, the exhibition, created an increasingly important space for commercial competition among painters and sculptors. Ironically, the same century that produced Immanuel Kant’s famous definition of beauty as “disinterested” (*interessellos*) also propelled art into the fray of commerce and the challenge of public taste—that is, into modernity.

Portrait painting, long a favorite of patrons and a mainstay of artists’ incomes, came under particular criticism as a species of “self-love.” Portrait painters, one observer said acidly, are “chiefly obliged” to the

*Vanity and Self-love of their Employers, Passions which must ever be gratified, and the Owners of them are ever ready (though Remiss upon other Occasion) to open their Purses to the irresistible Flattery of Portrait Painting. . . . For be the Taste and Fashion of the Times what they may, or let them vary ever so much, or be they ever so preposterous—it is impossible for the Craft of Man to invent a Method to prevent the Sale of Portraits and Looking Glasses.*<sup>4</sup>

(Recall the painter poking fun at the “glass-fac’d” flatterer in *Timon of Athens*.)

Was a patron a vain narcissist or a generous underwriter and collector? The tension produced by these two ostensibly incompatible models of patronage emerges in the debates between two major eighteenth-century institutions: the Society of Artists of Great Britain and the Royal Academy. The Society fostered annual exhibitions for the sale of artwork. However, the Academy remained resistant to the notion of a general public that might consume art in a free marketplace. Sir Joshua Reynolds concisely presents the position of the Academy in his third *Discourse on Art*:

Be as select in those you endeavour to please, as in those whom you endeavor to imitate. Without love of fame you cannot do anything excellent, but by an excessive and undistinguishing thirst after it, you will come to have vulgar views; you will degrade your style; and your taste will be entirely corrupted. It is certain that the lowest style will be the most popular, as it falls within the compass of ignorance itself; and the Vulgar will always be pleased with what is natural, in the confined and misunderstood sense of the word. . . . I MENTION this, because our Exhibitions, while they produce such admirable effects, by nourishing emulation and calling our genius, have also a mischievous tendency, by seducing the Painter to an ambition to please indiscriminately the mixed multitude of people who resort to them.<sup>5</sup>

Patrons continued to receive bad press at the hands of some of the most eloquent and nimble satirists of English literature and English art. William Blake, himself no fan of art schools, academies, or Sir Joshua Reynolds, wrote a series of torrid epigrams on the bad taste of the age, and particularly on the folly of aspiring English collectors. “You must agree that Rubens was a Fool / And yet you make him master of your School,” begins a short poem addressed “To English Connoisseurs,” and another chants “Rafael Sublime Majestic Graceful Wise . . . Rubens Low

Vulgar Stupid Ignorant,” and so on. Yet another of these barbed verses is entitled, with a fine diminuendo,

On the Great Encouragement  
 Given by English Nobility to Correggio Rubens  
 Rembrandt Reynolds Gainsborough Catalani  
 DuCrowe & Dilbury Doodle

But perhaps most striking among the frank and vivid epigrams that have been collected under the heading “On Art and Artists” is a little dialogue between the poet (who was also, of course, a painter and engraver) and a powerful allegorical woman whom he addresses as “Mother Outline”:<sup>6</sup>

“O dear Mother Outline! Of wisdom most sage,  
 What’s the first part of painting?” She said: “Patronage.”  
 “And what is the second, to please and engage?”  
 She frowned like a fury, and said, “Patronage.”  
 “And what is the third?” She put off old age,  
 And smil’d like a siren, and said, “Patronage.”<sup>7</sup>

In this delectable piece of Blakean fantasy, woman is divided into a familiar set of three parts (old wise woman, fury, siren), and the elusive and allusive word “Patronage” is given a full operatic performance in all of its contradictory dimensions: first oracular, then hissing, and finally, enduringly, seductive. Blake’s “patronage” hovers in the air, a ghostly afterimage, the smile of the siren lingering after the rest of the scene has faded. (A biographical aside: Blake’s own experiences with patrons were largely unhappy. When he died in August 1827, he was destitute.)

As we have seen, the change of economic structures in the industrial age produced a shift in the patronizing class. No longer did nobility, royalty, and gentry have a monopoly on becoming donors; nor were persons of humbler station the exclusive recipients of their largesse. Victorian patrons were often members of the rising middle class, while some of the artists they

patronized were gentry, or, at the least, moved in sophisticated social circles. One result of this social reversal was that the new patrons, less confident about their knowledge of art history, began to pour money into the purchase of new art.<sup>8</sup> Here is the classic formulation of Lady Elizabeth Eastlake, an author and critic who was also the wife of the president of the Royal Academy, and director of the National Gallery.

The patronage which had been almost exclusively the privilege of the nobility and higher gentry, was now shared (to be subsequently almost engrossed) by a wealthy and intelligent class, chiefly enriched by commerce and trade; the notebook of the painter, while it exhibited lowlier names, showing henceforth higher prices. To this gradual transfer of patronage another advantage very important to the painter was owing: namely, that collections, entirely of modern and sometimes only of living artists, began to be formed. For one sign of the good sense of the *nouveau-riche* consisted in a consciousness of his ignorance upon matters of connoisseurship. This led him to seek an article fresh from the painter's loom, in preference to any hazardous attempts at the discrimination of older fabrics.<sup>9</sup>

Thus the upwardly mobile Victorians began to collect "contemporary art." Art contemporary to *themselves*, of course—the works of painters like Frith and Landseer. They may not have known much about art, but they knew what they liked, and bought it.

Artists either complied with their new class of patrons, or grumbled—in public and private. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who had made himself vulnerable to a particular patron's wishes because he wanted to avoid the judgment of a public exhibition, complained in a letter to Ford Madox Brown about Frederick Leyland, a wealthy Liverpool shipowner, who had been his generous supporter: "I have often said that to be an artist is just the same thing as to be a whore, as far as dependence on the whims and fancies of individuals is concerned."<sup>10</sup>

J. M. Whistler had a similar relationship, and a similar break, with Leyland, when Whistler's extravagant and beautiful design for the Peacock Room in Leyland's house proved too costly for the patron's taste. Leyland paid only half the requested two hundred guineas, and the two parted company acrimoniously. When Whistler subsequently went bankrupt, he was not reticent about blaming the situation on his former patron.

### *Patronizing Modernity*

Throughout Europe, the pattern and personalities of patronage shifted over time, as economic circumstances changed and artists began to negotiate on their own, acknowledging the need to sell or place their work. This shift, indeed, laid the groundwork for the modern system that integrates artists in a network of social and fiscal relations. The French Academy—like its British counterpart—had actively discouraged its members from combining the sale of art with artistic production, forbidding artists “to do anything to permit the confounding of two such different things as a mercenary profession and the status of Academicians.”

But a new group of dealers representing painters and sculptors began to develop in France—and elsewhere—in the nineteenth century. Renoir, for one, declared, “there's only one indicator for telling the value of paintings, and that is the sale room.”<sup>11</sup> Gauguin had been a stockbroker. Both Theo van Gogh and his better-known brother worked as dealers for many years, and, indeed, Vincent regarded his brother as both an aesthetic collaborator and a representative.<sup>12</sup> Picasso was represented by Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler and then by the entrepreneurial Paul Rosenberg, who set up for his client gallery exhibitions from Paris across Europe and then in the United States. By the 1930s—the decade in which the Museum of Modern Art's powerful director, Alfred Barr, mounted a retrospective of Picasso's work—the relationships among galleries, dealers, curators, and museum exhibitions had been fashioned into a highly beneficial

and workable patronage system. This system functioned well into the later twentieth century, and it is still preeminent today.<sup>13</sup>

Twentieth-century writers, too, continued to have their patrons. Once again, this relationship often remained highly ambivalent: talent and money were equally eroticized, and some species of creative ingratitude was perhaps inevitable. The patronage relationships of modern authors were often further complicated by social and personal issues such as class, sex, and race, all of which exacerbated both the difference between patron and patronized and their mutual imbrication. One striking example may perhaps stand for many others.

A wealthy white widow, Charlotte van de Veer Quick Mason, became the patron of several key figures in the Harlem Renaissance, including Alain Locke, Zora Neale Hurston, Aaron Douglas, and Langston Hughes. Mason, who liked to be called “Godmother,” gave funding to support black artists, but required a certain degree of reciprocity. She shared the view of many at the time that Negro art and culture were suffused with spirituality and primitive energy, and vocally differed with Frederick Douglass, the “father of African art,” when he disagreed with this romantic ideal. Her story provides an all-too-vivid example of the doubled valence, and danger, of “patronizing the arts.” Mason gave funds to underwrite the play *Mule Bone*, coauthored by Hurston and Hughes (later, when she withdrew her support from Hughes, a rift developed between the two writers, and Hurston claimed the play as her own). The dapper Hughes was asked to cut back on his social life, and received gifts of clothing and opera tickets. Mason also asked him to accompany her to balls and other public functions. She advised him on the content and tone of his first novel, *Not Without Laughter* (1930), and he was ultimately dissatisfied with some of the changes she suggested.

In his autobiography, Langston Hughes wrote about the difficulties of this patronage relation: “. . . having just been through a tense and disheartening winter after a series of misunderstandings with the kind lady who had been my patron.

She wanted me to be more African than Harlem—primitive in the simple, intuitive, and noble sense of the word. I couldn't be, having grown up in Kansas City, Chicago and Cleveland.”<sup>14</sup> Langston Hughes split from Mason in 1930, although he wrote her letters seeking to reinstate the connection. And he lost touch, as a result of the schism, with Locke and Hurston, who remained loyal and indebted to their “Godmother” for patronage and support.

With certain exceptions—like the \$100 million-plus donation that the heiress Ruth Lilly made to *Poetry Magazine* in 2002<sup>15</sup>—literary patrons are less visible today than in previous decades and centuries. Perhaps this is because the profession of “writer” has now attached itself to a brave new world of publishing and contracts, agents and editors, bookstores, magazines, and journals, not to mention the worlds of self-publishing (pioneered in the nineteenth century by Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman) and the world of the weblog. Writers often teach writing, either in colleges and universities or in evening programs, summer institutes, or institutions for “life-long learning.” The creative writing lectureship or professorship and the book contract—tantalizingly described in *six* or very occasionally *seven figures*—are the patronage units of the present day.

### *Postmodern (Post-)Patrons*

The twenty-first century continues to see analogous transformations in the business of the visual arts: contemporary patronage networks increasingly include not only collectors but also galleries, who perform a number of the financially sustaining and personally inspiring roles that were fulfilled in earlier years by the individual patron. Dealers like Leo Castelli and Illeana Sonnabend (both based in New York) have given monthly stipends to the artists affiliated with their galleries, sometimes supporting them through years of meager sales. Some dealers assist with production costs, which can be significant in certain cases. Take Jeff Koons, for instance, whose forty-three-foot-high

topiary sculpture *Puppy* required not only a steel frame but the laborious installation of hundreds of living flowers and plants. Although the standard activities connected with representing artists remain—placing the work in private collections or in museums, photographing and archiving new work, and so on—the modern dealer is also a friend, confidant, personal manager, and publicist.<sup>16</sup> And in the world of the “art star,” the world of present-day art, gallerists are also competing with one another for high-profile artists, and artists are switching galleries and representation in a series of economic moves that resemble the “free agency” in professional sports.

In practice, dealers have long been part of the process of taste-making at the heart of this new structure of art-world patronage. However, this social and economic fact has sometimes struck observers as contravening a cherished notion of art. The fact that the critic Roberta Smith, writing in the *New York Times* in celebration of the booming Chelsea art scene, has to defend it against accusations that it is “dealer driven” in contrast with the purer “artist-driven” Soho, draws attention to the persistent romanticism of this idea of pure art. “The dealers,” wrote Smith,

are exactly what’s best about Chelsea. As small, basically family-run businesses, commercial galleries are the closest link between new art and the everyday public. Unlike increasingly corporate, supposedly non-profit museums, they are run by one or two people who decide what will go on view, without having to get permission from a director, board of trustees or corporate sponsor—and admission is free. The dealer may even look longer and think harder than his or her museum counterparts, because the dealer’s own money is on the line. And the link between the art and the public is especially direct in Chelsea; the glass-fronted spaces currently in favor allow pedestrians to see a great deal of art without ever leaving the sidewalk.<sup>17</sup>

That galleries should have come to rival museums in the ambitiousness of their exhibitions—another point Smith makes—says

something suggestive about the current state of arts patronage. And the “backlash” against the Chelsea scene, which condemns it as overly commercial and homogeneous, “a consensus of mediocrity and frivolousness” according to one gallery dealer, is likewise indicative of the unease produced by the specter of artistic success and its indebtedness to dealers, to museum donors, and to the public.

Many of today’s artists still work on contract or on commission. While this practice is most visible among architects, it is also common to some other studio artists. They may occasionally find wealthy patrons who are also deeply knowledgeable about contemporary art—patrons like Eli Broad, a collector and sponsor, who built two Fortune 500 companies over five decades, before turning to a full-time life of what is now called venture philanthropy; or Agnes Gund, president emerita of the Museum of Modern Art, a lifelong collector of modern and contemporary art, and an early patron of major artists like Robert Rauschenberg, Mark Rothko, and Jasper Johns. But despite all the language one hears about “modern Medicis,” by and large most artists are independent workers, not contracted to patrons in the old Renaissance fashion, which is to say that they are in fact *dependent* on grants from foundations and the government, and on teaching, to support their studio work and exhibitions.

Here is where government, academia, commerce, and the arts come together in a potentially fruitful but also contestatory relation.

### *Culture Vultures*

Like “hodgepodge,” “higgledy-piggledy,” “legal eagle” (or “legal beagle”), and “fag hag,” all current entries in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the phrase “culture vulture” has a built-in pseudo-logic based upon its rhyme. Also, newspapers love it. It is a term that catches the eye in a headline. (Here are some recent sightings: “The Candidates as Culture Vultures.” “Why the Queen

Is No Culture Vulture.” “Material Girl Turns Culture Vulture.” “Hungry French Culture Vultures Feed on Eng Lit.”)<sup>18</sup>

But it is also, of course, a phrase with a history.

By the time the term “culture vultures” appears in Dylan Thomas’s *Quite Early One Morning* (1954), it has already acquired a negative connotation. The context, alas, is “A Visit to America,” a description of the voracious and indiscriminate appetite for visiting artists, novelists, and lecturers making their way, and their income, from Europe to America. The date of this devastating little account is 1953, but—allowing for globalization and for some slight shift in gender politics away from the automatic derogation of women’s clubs—the narrative is not unfamiliar. Let me treat you to Thomas’s unbeatable prose:

See the garrulous others . . . gabbing and garlanded from one nest of culture-vultures to another: people selling the English way of life and condemning the American way as they swig and guzzle through it; people resurrecting the theories of surrealism for the benefit of remote parochial female audiences who did not know it was dead, not having ever known it was alive; people talking about Etruscan pots and pans to a bunch of dead pans and wealthy pots in Boston.<sup>19</sup>

While today it is obligatory for performers to speak highly, even fawningly, of their audiences—every baseball and football player thanks the fans—in those earlier, more robust, and less politically correct times visiting lecturers, from Sigmund Freud to Oscar Wilde, were happy to be lionized while privately, and not so privately, deploring the comical limitations of their audiences. Thomas takes the measure of both sides. As you can see, the garrulous—and bibulous—lecturers come in for as much genial irony as the culture vultures. But—as you can also see—the term has a powerful persuasiveness. Call it the flip side of “patronizing”—in this case the protégé patronizes his public, if only for a New York (or Boston) minute. But Dylan Thomas was, happily, atypical, and even he took more pleasure

in the access to his admiring public than he was here willing to acknowledge.

### *Patrons of Culture*

The relation between an individual patron and his or her protégés was always, of course, only one model of “patronizing the arts.” Participatory patronage meant that many people could be “patrons” in a sense that came closer to cultural consumption than to cultural production. As early as the time of Charles Dickens the notion of the “patron” had come to mean sponsor in a slightly different sense, a sense that continues in arts organizations (and fund-raising) today. In Dickens’s brilliant novel *Our Mutual Friend*, the kindly common man, Mr. Boffin, who has unexpectedly inherited the estate of his rich employer, voices his impatience with patronage as a mode of social climbing for the middle class:

“Patrons and Patronesses, and Vice-Patrons and Vice-Patronesses, and Deceased Patrons and Deceased Patronesses, and Ex-Vice Patrons and Ex-Vice Patronesses, what does it all mean . . . ?

“I can’t go anywhere without being Patronized. I don’t want to be Patronized. If I buy a ticket for a Flower Show, or a Music Show, or any sort of Show, and pay pretty heavy for it, why am I to be Patroned and Patronessed as if the Patrons and Patronesses treated me? If there’s a good thing to be done, can’t it be done on its own merits? If there’s a bad thing to be done, can it ever be Patroned and Patronessed right? Yet when a new Institution’s going to be built, it seems to me that the bricks and mortar ain’t made of half so much consequence as the Patrons and Patronesses; no, nor yet the objects. I wish somebody would tell me whether other countries get Patronized to anything like the extent of this one! And as to the Patrons and Patronesses themselves, I wonder they’re not ashamed of themselves. They ain’t Pills, or Hair-Washes, or Invigorating Nervous Essences, to be puffed in that way!”<sup>20</sup>

Allowing for Mr. Boffin's uncommon frankness—this is the Emperor's New Clothes moment for modern patronage—his description of contemporary Patrons and Patronesses, “puffed” on the playbills and plaques of cultural institutions, has a disquietingly familiar (and modern) ring. “The art patrons of the Renaissance,” S. N. Behrman observed shrewdly, “had themselves painted into the pictures they commissioned; because their American counterparts lived too late to have this service performed for them, they had to gain their immortality by buying collections and putting them in public museums.”<sup>21</sup> The Frick Collection. The Guggenheim Museum. The Getty Institute. The Morgan Library. The Kimbell Museum. The Broad Center for the Arts. Today “patron” and “donor” are carefully calibrated levels of fund-raising at cultural institutions like museums and theater companies. And instead of the image of the donor, we have the donor's name, whether corporate or personal, inscribed on the entablature or the letterhead.

If Dickens's litany of “ex-vice patronesses” and so forth seems excessive, consider the patronage options open to a twenty-first-century donor. At the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts, contributions are gratefully recorded and acknowledged from generous supporters who run the fiscal gamut from guardian angel to archangel to angel, and then, shifting from the celestial to the merely terrestrial sphere of giving, to (in order of generosity) benefactor, producer, partner, patron, and finally sponsor. What can be gleaned from this Great Chain of Funding is, among other things, that the principles of grade inflation function at all levels of cultural taxonomy. The once exalted patron is now near the bottom of the heap, while even the angel, long a term of endearment in the annals of theatrical management, is trumped—and out-trumpeted—by the guardian angel.

Arts venues have long been naming opportunities indebted to the generosity of individual patrons or corporate sponsors. The Art Institute of Chicago offers Ford Free Tuesdays, courtesy of the car-maker, not the foundation. New York's storied

Broadway theaters now include the American Airlines Theatre (formerly the Selwyn), the Ford Center for the Performing Arts (aka the Lyric and Apollo Theaters), and the Cadillac Winter Garden (founded as the Winter Garden in 1911, adopted by the Cadillac motor company in 2002). Boston's Citi Performing Arts Center, once called the Metropolitan Theatre (1925) and later the Music Hall (1962), was renamed CitiWang Center for the Performing Arts in 1983 after a generous gift from philanthropist An Wang, founder of Wang Laboratories.

This onomastic explosion in the arts corresponds, it is perhaps needless to say, to the general tendency to put a corporate or commercial brand on other entertainment venues, notably sports stadiums. Among major-league baseball teams, the Texas Rangers play at Ameritrust Field, the Detroit Tigers in Comerica Park, the Chicago White Sox at U.S. Cellular Field, the San Diego Padres at PETCO Park, the Philadelphia Phillies at Citizens Bank Park, the Tampa Bay Devil Rays at Tropicana Field. These are the names as of this writing, but there is no guarantee that they will remain so. The naming rights function like high-end billboards; Chase Field, the home of the Arizona Diamondbacks, was previously Bank One Ballpark. The former Enron Field, home of the Houston Astros, is now Minute Maid Park, although Houston is not renowned for its orange groves. And I have not even mentioned the Allstate Sugar Bowl (formerly the Nokia Sugar Bowl) or the Tostitos Fiesta Bowl.

Perhaps the winner in this name-change sweepstakes, though, is the golf tournament known from 2004 to 2006 as the Cialis Western Open, the second oldest professional golf tournament in the United States. Beginning life as the Western Open, it became in the palmy eighties the Beatrice Western Open (named after Beatrice Foods, not Dante's ideal love), and then in rapid succession the Centel Western Open, the Sprint Western Open, the Motorola Western Open, the Advil Western Open, and then the Cialis Western Open. In 2006 the event was scheduled for a complete makeover, and was renamed the BMW Championship. From Cialis to BMW—talk about the Ultimate Driving Machine.

It may be hard to top these commercial and cultural transitions, but the arts are doing the best they can to keep up. Like other kinds of institutions, the visual and performing arts have long offered naming opportunities for bricks and mortar, as well as for endowments: a gift from Laurence A. and Preston Robert Tisch made possible, in 1982, the purchase and renovation of space for what would become the Tisch School of the Arts at NYU, and philanthropists Edythe L. and Eli Broad made a major contribution to enable the construction of the Broad Art Center at UCLA. Buildings, galleries, theaters, and museums are traditional beneficiaries of sponsor generosity.

But a new aspect of arts patronage has now entered the fray, with the decision of ballet companies to auction off, not their theaters or seats, but their top dancers. As Erika Kinetz reported in the *New York Times*, “American ballet companies have recently begun allowing donors to sponsor individual dancers, for amounts that range from \$2,500 to \$100,000 a year. Some ballet companies even compile and distribute rosters, which look eerily like shopping lists, specifying their dancers’ ranks and prices.” In nineteenth-century Europe and America, liaisons between rich men and female dancers were sometimes fostered by management. But the *Times* article focused—perhaps as a sign of the times (and the *Times*)—not on men sponsoring women, but instead on women sponsoring men.<sup>22</sup>

Two large color photographs of smiling women and the male dancers they had paid top dollar to sponsor adorned the top half of the Dance page. And the text emphasized that this sponsorship was “practical” and “friendly,” not “intimate” or erotic. The sponsor of an American Ballet Theatre principal dancer gave cooking tips to his girlfriend (another principal dancer with the company). The sponsor of a male dancer with the Atlanta Ballet planned to invite him home for dinner with her four sons. For his part, the dancer acknowledged his sense of obligation to his patron—“to be quite frank, they are paying your salary”—and said he planned not only to accept the dinner invitation (“I would definitely rotate my schedule to

accommodate anything”) but also to cook her dinner and send her birthday gifts.<sup>23</sup>

The sponsor is not always a single individual; several of the ABT sponsors were couples or family groups. In other cases, as with the Houston Ballet, the company asks donors to “endow a dancer position, in the manner of an endowed chair at a symphony or university, rather than to sponsor an individual artist.”<sup>24</sup> This practice both protects the funding—if a dancer leaves the company, the funding stays—and also guards against overpersonalization. But the American Ballet Theatre posts the patron’s name on its Web site: “Mr. ———’s performances at American Ballet Theatre are sponsored by ———.”

A full-color spread in the *New York Times Magazine* heralded the rise of a long-suppressed type, the “patron sweetheart.”<sup>25</sup> Full-color, full-page photographs in the style of a *Vogue* or *Vanity Fair* magazine cover featured five New York women, most in their thirties, one a youthful twenty-six, each surrounded by works of art they collect or sponsor. The information in the captions reflects this curious combination of art patronage and personal shopping. Thus the description of Allison Sarofim, the daughter of two wealthy Texas art collectors, ends, “Sarofim’s own collection includes the Rothko over the fireplace. Zac Posen dress, \$1,600.” Another patron was identified not only by “the three paintings by de Kooning that surround her but also by her Chloe dress, \$2,560. [www.neimanmarcus.com](http://www.neimanmarcus.com). Christina Addison earrings, Manolo Blahnik sandals.” The price of the dress and the Neiman Marcus Web site from which you could buy it were given in the text.

This feature appeared in the *Times* Style pages, not the Art section, and a certain amount of having-it-both-ways journalistic schadenfreude seemed to accompany the description of its subjects, described in the article as “not Bergdorf blondes looking for a cause between collagen injections and lunch at Le Cirque” but rather “the behind-the-scenes movers and shakers, planning the parties, picking the art.” What is probably most telling, and most symptomatic, is the evocation, in the

first line of the brief (one-paragraph) article that accompanies the glam photographs, of the telltale M-word. *M*, for Medici. Here is the opening sentence: “The fall, for Manhattan’s young Medici types, can be grueling—with galas and openings and armory-size antiques-fests clogging up the social calendar well into winter.”

Let’s leave aside for a moment the fact that the armories of the Medicis were quite possibly clogged with weaponry rather than with antiques. The idea of these “patron sweethearts” as young Medici types is, nonetheless, both alluring and suggestive.

We are, in fact, in the midst of a full-scale Medici revival in popular culture—the second time as farce. A four-part series on PBS in 2004 was called *The Medici, Godfathers of the Renaissance*, and the Mafia analogy was insistent and deliberate. CBS’s *60 Minutes* went to Italy to observe the exhumation of the Medici family tombs by some historians of medicine, in a program entitled *Tales from the Crypt* (broadcast October 3, 2004). But why was this headline stuff for *60 Minutes*? The double valence of the Medicis (lurid family history, patrons of high culture) made them both irresistible and contemporary. The Medicis-R-Us. Or so we would like to think.

Indeed this idea—that there is a new class of American Medicis, movers and shakers who are patrons of the arts—has been a tempting one for more than half a century. For Senator John F. Kennedy, even as he campaigned for the presidency in 1960, this was a role to be fulfilled by an enlightened government. As he wrote in a letter to the editor of the periodical *Musical America* (which describes itself today as “the business source for the performing arts”), “There is a connection, hard to explain logically but easy to feel, between achievement in public life and progress in the arts. The age of Pericles was also the age of Phidias. The age of Lorenzo de Medici was also the age of Leonardo da Vinci. The age of Elizabeth was also the age of Shakespeare. And the New Frontier for which I campaign in public life can also be a new frontier for the American arts.”<sup>26</sup> In this case the Medici function was to be fulfilled not by the

individual patron but by the government. And as we are about to see, this mode of sponsorship, too, has its pitfalls.

### *A Late Frost*

At John F. Kennedy's inauguration in 1961, he sought to emphasize the difference between his White House and Dwight Eisenhower's by incorporating a celebrated American poet into the proceedings. The poet he chose was Robert Frost, then in his eighties, a former poetry consultant to the Library of Congress. After Kennedy's own stirring remarks—"Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country"—he turned the podium over to Frost, who had written a new poem, entitled "Dedication," for the inaugural occasion. (The poem was later published as "For John F. Kennedy, His Inauguration.") But—as anyone who saw these events on television will vividly recall—Washington, D.C. had just emerged from a winter storm, and the glare of the sun on the snow blinded Frost from seeing his text. (In those long-ago days, his poem was on a piece of paper, blowing in the wind, not mounted invisibly upon a teleprompter.) Although Kennedy and Vice-president-elect Lyndon Johnson tried to shield the aging poet's eyes from the sun, he could not read. So Frost abandoned his occasional poem and recited, instead, one he knew by heart, the familiar and powerful poem called "The Gift Outright":

The land was ours before we were the land's.  
 She was our land more than a hundred years  
 Before we were her people. She was ours  
 In Massachusetts, in Virginia.  
 But we were England's, still colonials,  
 Possessing what we still were unpossessed by,  
 Possessed by what we now no more possessed. . . .  
 Such as we were we gave ourselves outright  
 (The deed of gift was many deeds of war)  
 To the land vaguely realizing westward,

But still unstoried, artless, unenhanced,  
Such as she was, such as she will become.<sup>27</sup>

The poem today sounds, in a way, astonishingly politically incorrect, full of paeans to mastery, ownership, and expansion, ignoring the preexistence in “our” land of many native peoples, many prior stories, arts, and enhancements, not to mention the practice of slavery that made the rhetoric of possession seem double-edged at best. Ishmael Reed would observe many years later, “Frost’s poem is the last gasp of the settler sensibility. It says the country was created so it could be occupied by Europeans.”<sup>28</sup> This is the danger of trying to patronize poets who are still alive: they might write something the patrons—or a later cultural sensibility—find embarrassing. But it is not the business of poetry to be politically correct.

“The Gift Outright” was, and is, a powerful poem, stirring in its rhythms, patriotic in its themes, the perfect complement to Kennedy’s own clarion call to the nation. Originally written in 1942, in the midst of World War II, it was a hot war poem for a cold war time. Whether they admired it or deplored it, those who were there remembered it. Poet Derek Walcott, who noted all the flaws in the poem, had this to say about the occasion: “By then as much an emblem of the republic as any rubicund senator, with his flying white hair, an endangered species like a rare owl, there was the old poet who, between managing the fluttering white hair and the fluttering white paper, had to recite what seemed more like an elegy than a benediction.”<sup>29</sup> And another poet, Galway Kinnell, recalled the moment, memorably, in his poem called “For Robert Frost.”

I saw you once on the TV,  
Unsteady at the lectern,  
The flimsy white leaf  
Of hair standing straight up  
In the wind, among top hats,  
Old farmer and son

Of worse winters than this,  
 Stopped in the first dazzle

Of the District of Columbia,  
 Suddenly having to pay  
 For the cheap onionskin,  
 The worn-out ribbon, the eyes  
 Wrecked from writing poems  
 For us—stopped,  
 Lonely before millions,  
 The paper jumping in your grip,

And as the Presidents  
 Also on the platform  
 Began flashing nervously  
 Their Presidential smiles  
 For the harmless old guy,  
 And poets watching on the TV  
 Started thinking, Well that's  
 The end of *that* tradition,

And the managers of the event  
 Said, Boys this is it,  
 This sonofabitch poet  
 Is gonna croak,  
 Putting the paper aside  
 You drew forth  
 From your great faithful heart  
 The poem.<sup>30</sup>

This image, genuine twenty-four-carat American pathos with a timely touch of *King Lear*, depends for its effectiveness—and it is very effective—upon the contrast between the frail, aged man and the robust, powerful poem. (And also, we might note in passing, upon the contrast between the oral and the written, the former, in this case, a kind of guarantor of authenticity.

“Putting the *paper* aside . . . You drew forth / From your . . .  
*heart* / The poem.”)

What would have happened if Frost had read, instead, the poem he had composed for the occasion? Here is how “Dedication” begins:

Summoning artists to participate  
In the august occasions of the state  
Seems something artists ought to celebrate.  
Today is for my cause a day of days.  
And his be poetry’s old-fashioned praise  
Who was the first to think of such a thing.  
This verse that in acknowledgement I bring  
Goes back to the beginning of the end  
Of what had been for centuries the trend;  
A turning point in modern history.<sup>31</sup>

The poem ends—and would have ended, that cold and sunny  
January day—with a trumpet blast and a bathetic thump:

It makes the prophet in us all presage  
The glory of a next Augustan age  
Of a power leading from its strength and pride,  
Of a young ambition eager to be tried,  
Firm in our free beliefs without dismay,  
In any game the nations want to play.  
A golden age of poetry and power  
Of which this noonday’s the beginning hour.

All things considered, I think we may be thankful for that gust of wind and that blinding glare that replaced an “occasional” poem of far lesser merit, written under the pressure of patronage, with a better poem written without it. The event, watched by millions on television, gave new (if brief) prestige to poetry in America, and—as the *New York Times* noted years later, “earned [Frost] unofficial recognition as the poet laureate of the United States.”<sup>32</sup> And yet there were many who did take exception to the “American exceptionalism” expressed in his poem.

The next president to invite a poet to speak at his inaugural was Bill Clinton, thirty-two years later. The poet was Maya Angelou, and the poem, “On the Pulse of Morning,” was the first actually written and performed for the inauguration of a president. It is never possible to guess at a poet’s motivation or inspiration for writing a particular poem, but some aspects of Angelou’s verse seemed to suggest that she had read Frost’s “The Gift Outright” (the poem he *performed*, not the poem he *wrote* for the Kennedy inaugural) and that she was speaking back to it. She cited, for example, all those who might have been thought to have been excluded from Frost’s colonial “gift”:

the Asian, the Hispanic, the Jew,  
 The African, the Native American, the Sioux,  
 The Catholic, the Muslim, the French, the Greek  
 The Irish, the Rabbi, the Priest, the Sheik,  
 The Gay, the Straight, the Preacher,  
 The privileged, the homeless, the Teacher.

Predictably, the poem itself got mixed reviews, though many people praised the poet’s energy and delivery. “I felt that woman could have read the side of a cereal box,” said novelist Louise Erdrich. “Her presence was so powerful and momentous.” A “prominent poet” who declined to have his name used told a reporter for the *Washington Post*, “I was hoping that it would be short, and it was long,” adding that “Maya Angelou is to Robert Frost as Bill Clinton is to John Kennedy.” “The Gift Outright” had been sixteen lines long; “On the Pulse of Morning” was thirteen stanzas long and took five and a half minutes to read. Rita Dove, who had won a Pulitzer Prize for her own poetry, sought to reposition Angelou’s poem as part of a different genre of verse: “I wouldn’t compare it to a poem I’ll read over and over again in silence. That’s not the kind of poem it was meant to be. It’s a song, really.”<sup>33</sup>

On the other hand, the poem certainly served a political purpose. Bill Clinton said he loved it and would hang a copy in the White House. “Having a black woman poet was a wonderful

symbol,” said Louise Erdrich, and it was Angelou’s presence as symbol, personality, and inspiration that lingered after the event. The poem itself promptly became a best seller, underscoring Maya Angelou’s reputation as a poet of the people, rather than a poet’s poet. The fact that she had written the poem became as important as the poem she had written.

At Clinton’s second inaugural, Arkansas poet Miller Williams read a poem called “Of History and Hope” (it will not be forgotten that Bill Clinton was a native of Hope, Arkansas; Maya Angelou had also ended her poem, perhaps subliminally, “with hope”).

But since that time this presidential precedent has fallen into abeyance. As the Associated Press reported in January 2001, “President-elect Bush has decided not to include a poet at his inauguration. A spokeswoman for the Presidential Inaugural Committee, Natalie Rule, cited no reason for his decision.”<sup>34</sup> The AP writer, succumbing to temptation, began this brief item, “It’ll be an inaugural with no doggerel.”

### *Once More, O Ye Laurels*

Robert Frost was an unofficial “poet laureate,” working—and writing—on behalf of the head of state, but the title “laureate” was not awarded to poets in the United States until more than twenty years after his death. The history of this curious office, in effect that of government poet, will suggest some of the complications that come about when the patron is the king, president, governor, or (most complicated of all) “we the people.” The result, as you will see, is not always sanguine or salubrious.

The term “laureate” literally means “crowned with laurel leaves,” or “bays.” (As Andrew Marvell puts it, in a poem about the resistance to worldly fame, “How vainly men themselves amaze / To win the palm, the oak, or bays.”<sup>35</sup>) According to Greek mythology, the god Apollo, patron of poetry and music, chased the nymph Daphne, who fled to a riverbank, where with the help of a river god she was transformed into the laurel tree;

Apollo thenceforth wore a laurel wreath as a sign of his love for her. Ancient and medieval poets were often literally crowned with laurel wreaths. The most famous paintings of Dante show him thus bedecked. Petrarch's beloved Laura was both a lady named "Laura" and a laurel tree (*il lauro*). The poet makes love to the idea of poetic fame. When she dies, he writes poems. The death of Laura becomes the birth of the laureate.

In England, Ben Jonson had been an "unofficial" laureate for James I, a literary king, but the office itself was created in the time of Charles II, and the first real "poet laureate" of Britain was John Dryden, appointed in 1670. A record of that time lists the new court officer among others of "His Majesties Servants in Ordinary," including "One Geographer, One Historiographer, One Hydrographer, One Library Keeper, one Poet Laureat, one Publick Notary." The original fee for the Laureate was £100, plus a "butt of sack." (When a later laureate tried to get the payment in wine converted to a payment in cash, the wine was mysteriously *included* in the £100 fee by the thrifty monarch—a case of wine turning into water, rather than the other way around.)<sup>36</sup>

Initially the official laureate was a combination of panegyrist and propagandist—a role that is no longer held in government by a poet, but is nonetheless recognizable as a function of several of our paid officials. The two occasions for which "occasional poems" were required were New Year's Day and the king's birthday, on each of which the laureate was to produce an ode that would be set to music and performed in the presence of royalty. Early laureates labored mightily under these thankless tasks—the Hanoverian Georges were particularly tin-eared when it came to English poetry.

Dryden himself was already a celebrated poet and dramatist when he was appointed to first official laureate. (It is worth noting that most of the next several laureates were dramatists, not—as today—lyric poets.) Documents of the period describing the new laureate call him "the most ingenious and learned John Dryden."<sup>37</sup> But a roll call of his successors will indicate

the degree to which fame can be fleeting: Thomas Shadwell, Nahum Tate, Nicholas Rowe, Laurence Eusden, Colley Cibber, William Whitehead, Henry Pye, and Alfred Austin are no longer household words, if they ever were, although—to be fair—it is also the case that Wordsworth, Tennyson, Robert Bridges, and John Masefield have held this (increasingly symbolic) post. Some who were asked declined the honor, not wishing to spend their time writing birthday odes to kings.

In the nineteenth century the office became overtly ceremonial, no longer requiring “any onerous or disagreeable duties.” Queen Victoria’s prime minister Robert Peel wrote to Wordsworth, who had initially turned down the post, “Do not be deterred by the fear of any obligations which the appointment may be supposed to imply. I will undertake that you shall have nothing required of you.” The laureateship was an honor, offered simply because of Wordsworth’s “eminence as a poet.”<sup>38</sup> Wordsworth accepted it in the same spirit, as an honor that expressed “a sense of the national importance of Poetic Literature.”<sup>39</sup> We should notice that this tribute came at the end of his career, not when Wordsworth was a young radical but when he was an old and established figure. Aged seventy-three, and long resident in the Lake District far from London, Wordsworth borrowed a suit of court clothes from the literary socialite Samuel Rogers in order to attend a levee at the behest of the sovereign, then returned immediately to the mountains and the lakes. In the seven years that ensued between his appointment as poet laureate and his death, he never wrote a poem, or indeed so much as a line of poetry, in connection with the office.

This lack was made up, and more, by the laureate who followed, Alfred Tennyson, who held the rank for forty years, and wrote much distinguished and moving occasional verse. It is worth noting, though, that even Tennyson disliked the implications of the title. “Writing to order is what I hate,” he said. “They think a poet can write poems to order as a bootmaker makes boots.”<sup>40</sup> Despite this reluctance—born, it should be noted, from the bad reputation the word “laureate” had acquired

since its first official use in England—it was Tennyson, more than any other poet, who gave prestige and meaning to the modern role of poet laureate. He fulfilled the promise implicit in Wordsworth’s wistful phrase about the “national importance of Poetic Literature.” Tennyson became, in effect, England’s poet, the poet of the English language, of Englishness, and of English patriotism, at a time of high colonial and world expansiveness. “The Poet of the People,” he began to be called. The American poet James Russell Lowell would hail Tennyson as “The Laureate of the Tongue as well as the Nation.”

Tennyson’s poetry was frankly patriotic, and through it he advised and admonished, using poetry as a mode of public policy. Cardinal Manning thought his poem about the need for a stronger fleet “ought to be set to music and sung perpetually as a National Song in every town of the Empire.”<sup>41</sup>

After Tennyson’s death, Stéphane Mallarmé, writing from the vantage point of France, felt called upon to comment on the laureateship and its discontents, suggesting that England had misunderstood its “superb deceased” poet: “One nation has the right to remain unfamiliar with the poets of another; it so badly neglects its own! That misunderstood title of poet laureate, in addition, sounds like a license to engage in boosterism, seems almost to designate some sort of versifying comrade, inferior to the gossip columnist.”<sup>42</sup>

Tennyson’s successors, down to the most recent laureates, Ted Hughes and Andrew Motion, have increasingly served public roles, although they have been roles connected with education and public outreach, not with policy. Motion, indeed, has penned a poem on Princess Diana and two poems on the queen mother—one on her hundredth birthday, one on her funeral—all published in a volume called, not without irony, *Public Property*.

So the English model of the poet laureate went from one kind of patronage to another. How has the United States, so often emulous of England in matters of high culture, envisaged the role of national poet?

### *American Idol*

In 1985, in the wake of a long campaign by Senator Spark Matsunaga of Hawaii, himself a writer of poetry as well as a virtuoso of the harmonica, Congress changed the title of the consultant in poetry to the librarian of Congress, a little known and little noticed official. Henceforth the poetry consultant would be known as the poet laureate. Notice how comparatively recent this is. From Joseph Auslander in 1937 to Gwendolyn Brooks in 1985–86 the title of poetry consultant had stood alone, adorning the resumes and the reputations of such luminaries as Allen Tate, Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Frost, and Maxine Kumin. But Matsunaga felt the title gave insufficient visibility to poets and poetry. Indeed his first idea was that the laureate would be selected and appointed by the president of the United States (in 1985 that would have been Ronald Reagan). But the legislation was changed to keep the appointment in the hands of the librarian of Congress.

The poet laureate gets a stipend of \$35,000 (importantly, this is not government money, but the income from a private gift). Robert Penn Warren, who had been poetry consultant forty-five years earlier, was the first to hold the new title—a title a more recent laureate, Robert Pinsky, has viewed with some ambivalence. “‘Laureate’ is more royal sounding and Americans are suckers for that,” he said. “‘Laureate’ has cachet, but it also sounds like you’re serving an elite group.” For Pinsky the combination of a small stipend, a very small travel budget, and a nonexistent staff made the implied task of “trying to constantly create culture” a virtual impossibility, and one that made the laureate, whoever he or she might be, a “huckster for poetry.”<sup>43</sup> (Compare Mallarmé’s “license to aid boosterism.”)

Robert Penn Warren made it clear when he accepted the appointment that he would not serve if he were “required to compose an ode on the death of someone’s kitten.” He would not, he said, be a “hired applauder.”<sup>44</sup> More specifically, he would distinguish his role from that of his British counterpart.

“Of course, it’s not the same thing as the English version. There they write stuff celebrating the throne. I don’t expect you’ll hear me writing any poems to the greater glory of Ronald and Nancy Reagan. Why should I?”<sup>45</sup>

Again as a small footnote to history we might note that Senator Matsunaga, who had wanted to “upgrade” the position of poetry consultant so as to “provide young American poets with role models,” and who was not himself involved in the search process, had rather expected the first American laureate to be Gwendolyn Brooks, who was then the incumbent poetry consultant. (“I thought they might have just promoted Brooks right away,” he said, “but I guess they’re waiting till next year to start it up,” he told David Remnick at the *Washington Post*.) The designation of Robert Penn Warren as the first poet placed in the office a very distinguished writer who had already been poetry consultant (and who was a white man, not a black woman).

The first female laureate was Mona van Duyn (1992–93); the first black woman to hold the office, Rita Dove, was appointed the following year. The laureate for 2004–06, Ted Kooser, was a retired Nebraska insurance executive who has written ten volumes of poetry about the Midwest. The description of Kooser offered by the librarian of Congress, James Billington at the time of his appointment, says a good deal about just how representative the American laureate was now expected to be: “Ted Kooser is a major poetic voice for rural and small town America and the first poet laureate chosen from the Great Plains. His verse reaches beyond his native region to touch on universal themes in accessible ways.” Regional, universal, accessible. These are the key words of modern laureation. (Kooser’s reply was in kind. “We poets out here don’t get a lot of attention, and now I will and I have some trepidation over that.”)<sup>46</sup>

By contrast, Kooser’s successor, Donald Hall of New Hampshire, was heralded as “a poet in the distinctive American tradition of Robert Frost.” He lives in a white clapboard farmhouse in New Hampshire on land settled by his maternal great-grandfather, and encountered Frost at the Bread Loaf Writer’s

Conference when he was only sixteen, before going on to Harvard, Oxford, and Stanford. But Hall was also seen as a potential advocate for artists, unafraid of political controversy or plain speaking. It was noted that when he served on the advisory council of the National Endowment for the Arts during the first Bush administration he called those who interfered in the awarding of arts grants “bullies and art bashers.” (Billington, asked about this history, said he wasn’t aware of it, but that in any case the poets laureate “are chosen for their poetry, not chosen to make a statement about anything else.”)<sup>47</sup>

But Hall’s bluntness seems to have extended as well to debunking grumpy ideas about the death of poetry (“Death to the Death of Poetry” was one of his essays in 1989) and to what he calls the “McPoem”: “The McPoem is the product of the workshops of Hamburger University,” he once wrote, in an essay called “Poetry and Ambition,” and “every year Ronald McDonald takes the Pulitzer.” Poems, he contended, “must not express mere personal feeling or opinion—as the moment’s McPoem does. It must by its language make art’s new object.” Eastern newspapers—the *New York Times*, the *Boston Globe*—rejoiced in the return of the laureateship to the neighborhood, each offering an editorial urging Hall to speak out freely and bluntly; as Verlyn Klinkenborg noted, “There’s always the temptation for the laureate to find some anodyne ground to stand on. But these are not anodyne times.”<sup>48</sup>

Times change, laureates change. When Hall’s term was up, a “fellow New Englander”<sup>49</sup> with a very different history and style was appointed the fifteenth poet laureate. Charles Simic, born in Yugoslavia, is a former MacArthur fellow and a recipient, in 1990, of the Pulitzer Prize for poetry. The *New York Times*, which deployed the “New Englander” tag (Simic teaches at the University of New Hampshire) to mark the transition from one national poet to another, nonetheless stressed the differences. Simic was a “surrealist” with a “dark view,” declared the *Times* headline, and Simic himself was quoted as saying that his residence in the United States was a product of history: “Hitler

and Stalin were my travel agents.” Nonetheless he declined in an interview to address the question of “the role of poetry in culture,” preferring to quote a student he had met in an El Paso school in 1972, who had said that the goal or purpose of poetry was “to remind people of their own humanity.” (Nineteen seventy-two, the year of the Watergate break-in, the shooting of Governor George Wallace, Jane Fonda’s visit to Hanoi, the massacre of eleven Israeli athletes at the summer Olympic Games in Munich, and the reelection, by a landslide, of Richard Nixon as president of the United States, might have been a good year to be reminded of one’s humanity, though it is not quite clear what would be involved in such an aide-mémoire.)

Simic was approvingly described as a poet of “disconcerting shifts” and “sinister imagery” (the *Times* here quoting, as its authority, a previous review in—of course—the *New York Times*).<sup>50</sup> The same review had also characterized him as a poet with a “blunt plainspoken delivery punctuated with colloquialisms and deadpan ironies,” views echoed by librarian of Congress James H. Billington, who told the *Washington Post* that Simic’s work was “surreal and surprising, commonplace yet dream-like,” and “has both shades of darkness and flashes of ironic humor.”<sup>51</sup> In 2007, with the Iraq War going badly and President Bush’s popularity ratings hovering around 30 percent, irony, darkness, and surrealism were again mentionable qualities in connection with the highest poetic appointment in the land.

If one laureate is a good thing, would more laureates be better? This, too, we could say, is the American way with culture.

Indeed many of the *states*, it turns out, also have poets laureate—at present, close to forty states plus the District of Columbia. (The numbers change from time to time, since some states have subsequently discontinued these—largely unpaid—posts; or, as in the case of Pennsylvania, “have no plans to fill” them.) State laureates vary from the eminent (John Ashbery was poet laureate of New York; Grace Paley, poet laureate of Vermont) to the local and idiosyncratic. Songwriter John Denver was poet laureate of Colorado from 1974 until he died in 1997.

And the tasks of the state laureates have also varied widely. Some travel from schools to bookstores to libraries to Rotary Clubs, bringing poetry and literature to new audiences. The poet laureate of New Hampshire (Marie Harris) was asked to write a commemorative poem celebrating the minting of the New Hampshire quarter. Her poem, “Common Coin,” praised the famous profile of the state’s Old Man of the Mountain—which (unlike the poem, and the coin) subsequently collapsed three years later. Some laureates serve for life—like John Denver—others for as little as a year, like the poet laureate of the state of Texas, who is appointed together with a state musician and two state artists, one for two-dimensional media and one for three-dimensional. According to the statute, “the individuals designated as the poet laureate, the state musician, and the state artists do not receive any pay or emolument.”

It may not be lucrative, but that does not mean the position has been without controversy, or peril. Amiri Baraka (the former LeRoi Jones) was poet laureate of New Jersey until after the September 11 World Trade Center bombings, when his poem, “Somebody Blew Up America,” was deemed incendiary because of its anti-Israel—and some say anti-Semitic—sentiments. The position of New Jersey laureate, which was created in 1999 and pays \$10,000 for a two-year term, was worded in such a way that Baraka could not be fired, and he refused to resign, so some state legislators tried to abolish the position, and succeeded in July 2003.

The laureateship of California is a position for which poets apply—or, as it turned out, don’t apply, since many of the state’s best-known writers decline to do so (Adrienne Rich, Gary Snyder, Lawrence Ferlinghetti . . . ). Quincy Troupe, a poet, performer, and editor who did apply, and became California’s first official poet laureate, later resigned when it was learned that he had falsified his resume (claiming to have graduated from Grambling State). In the wake of the scandal—it turned out he had never passed *any* courses at Grambling, though in his first admission he said he had studied there though not earned a

degree—Troupe also resigned from the writing faculty of UC San Diego and returned to New York.

*(First) Ladies Bountiful*

One striking, though not surprising, fact about these U.S. poets laureate and the enterprise of the public support of poetry is that they sometimes seem to be, or to become, the properties of the first lady rather than of the governor or the president. The patronage of poetry, and the arts in general, is still women's work in the United States. California's first lady Sharon Davis announced the appointment of California's first official poet laureate in 2001, although there had been "unofficial" California-state poets, appointed for life, since 1915. And Laura Bush, as first lady of the United States, has been closely associated with the National Endowment for the Arts and its chair, poet Dana Gioia.

As Jacqueline Kennedy had once brought high culture (and decorative arts) to the White House, and Lady Bird Johnson identified herself with the "beautification" of America's highways (clearing them of billboards, planting flowers and trees), so Laura Bush, trained as a librarian, committed herself to cultural education. She and Dana Gioia collaborated to produce two blameless, but toothless, family-focused public projects, *Shakespeare in American Communities* and *American Masterpieces: Three Centuries of Artistic Genius*. The Shakespeare program, as its title suggests, was aimed at outreach and at "introducing" Shakespeare to children and families. Indeed, the official publicity materials stressed this even to the point of faint risibility, noting that the plays to be performed featured "famous families such as the Montagues and the Capulets, and memorable characters including Desdemona and Othello."

As for *American Masterpieces: Three Centuries of Artistic Genius*, the three centuries of the title turned out to be the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth. Representatives of the current century (described by columnist William Safire as "today's edgy artists"<sup>52</sup>) were not in evidence. Instead the program featured

“yesteryear’s greats” (that’s Safire again), from Aaron Copland to Georgia O’Keeffe. The highly touted \$18 million budget increase for the arts, after several years of cuts, was the largest proposed increase in National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) funding in twenty years. But all of that money was to go to underpin these new programs, programs in cultural exposure and cultural tourism—programs that would “introduce” Americans to the time-tested artists of the past, and not to the fast-moving, untested art world of their own time. This is a certain kind of arts patronage. But it reveals both the advantages, and the deep-seated problems that arise, when government patronizes the arts.

The programs for *Shakespeare in American Communities* and for *Three Centuries of Artistic Genius* are perfectly pleasant initiatives. Not only will they do no harm, they will surely do much good. But the keywords of the Bush/Gioia initiatives are “introduce” and “family,” and neither of these has much to do with the patronage of contemporary art. (As with Dr. Johnson and Lord Chesterfield, the patronage for current work may come too late to be of benefit to the artists whose achievements are most visionary.)

When the poet Robert Bly accepted the National Book Award for Poetry in 1968 he invoked the moral authority of the radical intellectuals of his time, who had spoken up—and acted up—against the Vietnam War:

We have some things to be proud of. No one needs to be ashamed of the acts of civil disobedience committed in the tradition of Thoreau. What Dr. Coffin did was magnificent; the fact that Yale University did not do it is what is sad. What Mr. Berrigan did was noble; the fact that the Catholic church did not do it is what is sad. What Mitchell Goodman did here last year was needed and in good taste. . . .

In an age of gross and savage crimes by legal governments, the institutions will have to learn responsibility, learn to take their part in preserving the nation, and take their risk by committing acts of disobedience. The book companies can

find ways to act like Thoreau, whom they publish. Where were the publishing houses when Dr. Spock and Mr. Goodman and Mr. Raskin—all three writers—were indicted? . . .

You have given me an award for a book that has many poems in it against the war. I thank you for the award. As for the \$1,000 check, I am turning it over to the draft-resistance movement, specifically to the organization called The Resistance.<sup>51</sup> (March 6, 1969)

The most dated part of this speech is the amount of the check. Today's National Book Award winners each get \$10,000 and a crystal sculpture.

But there is something moving, still, about this spectacle of a poet trying to change the world with “many poems against the war”—and a thousand-dollar check. Especially when we contrast it to the cancellation of the proposed White House Conference on “Poetry and the American Voice,” convened by First Lady Laura Bush for Lincoln’s birthday, February 12, 2003.

### *The Live Poets’ Society*

Mrs. Bush made cultural headlines when she declared, “There’s nothing political about American literature.”<sup>54</sup> The occasion was a flood of new poems by poets invited to the White House for Lincoln’s birthday, a day set aside for a symposium on the works of Emily Dickinson, Langston Hughes, and Walt Whitman, but intersecting, as it happened, with the onset of the war in Iraq. The White House event, which was to be called “Poetry and the American Voice,” was jettisoned—the word used at the time was “postponed,” but the conference was never rescheduled—after almost two thousand poets responded to an email suggestion by Sam Hamill, editor of the Copper Canyon Press, that they send him poems and statements opposing the war. Hamill planned to create an anthology of poems to present to the White House.

The singularity of the “American voice” was belied by this chorus of dissidence, articulated by concerned objectors. The

result was that the voices of contemporary American poets were silenced—at least in terms of official sponsorship. The White House put out the following statement: “While Mrs. Bush understands the right of all Americans to express their political views, this event was designed to celebrate poetry.” Katha Pollitt, writing in the *Nation*, observed ironically that it was “just like old times,” recalling an occasion “when Robert Lowell refused to attend a poetry symposium at the Johnson White House to protest the Vietnam War.”<sup>55</sup>

As many commentators pointed out, Whitman, Hughes, and Dickinson were odd choices if the point was to be somehow above politics. Pollitt remarked that

Whitman’s epic of radical democracy, *Leaves of Grass*, was so scandalous it got him fired from his government job; Hughes, a Communist sympathizer hounded by McCarthy, wrote constantly and indelibly about racism, injustice, power; Dickinson might seem the least political, but in some ways she was the most lastingly so—every line she wrote is an attack on complacency and conformity of manners, mores, religion, language, gender, thought.

She noted that Whitman was gay (“as perhaps were Hughes and Dickinson,” she wrote carefully), and that these “quintessentially American writers” were also profoundly “subversive.”<sup>56</sup>

Instead of live poets (unpredictable, ungovernable, uncontrollable) performing “Poetry and the American Voice” in real time (on five-second delay to allow for poetry malfunction), with all their flaws, eloquences, impertinencies, and importunacies, the event planned for Lincoln’s birthday 2003 was to be a celebration of a particular vision of the past. That Whitman, Hughes, and Dickinson were all “war poets” is in its own way indisputable. That they would have been comfortable houseguests, in person, in any White House, is very much to be doubted.

When war with Iraq did come, the laureates spoke, on both sides of the Atlantic. In response to the U.S. war in Iraq the British

poet laureate, Andrew Motion, wrote a thirty-word poem, “Causa Belli,” and published it in *The Guardian*.

They read good books, and quote, but never learn  
a language other than the scream of rocket-burn.  
Our straighter talk is drowned but ironclad;  
elections, money, empire, oil and Dad.

As Poetry International commented at the time, “There are several precedents in British literature of anti-war poems written by poet laureates, the most famous of which is ‘The Charge of the Light Brigade’ by Alfred Lord Tennyson, written after the Crimean war. However, the practice is far from common.” (The Tennyson poem, as readers of Virginia Woolf will recall, contains the haunting line “Someone had blundered.”)

The then-U.S. laureate, Billy Collins, not known as a political poet, signed an anti-war petition (together with Nobel laureate Derek Walcott, Richard Wilbur, John Ashbery, Robert Creeley, Charles Simic, James Tate, and others). Collins told the Associated Press,

If political protest is urgent, I don’t think it needs to wait for an appropriate scene and setting and should be as disruptive as it wants to be. I have tried to keep the West Wing and the East Wing of the White House as separate as possible because I support what Mrs. Bush has done for the causes of literacy and reading. But as this country is being pushed into a violent confrontation, I feel it increasingly difficult to maintain that separation.<sup>57</sup>

The East Wing and the West Wing may here stand for “private” and “government” patronage. As we have seen, it is not only modern day laureates who find it difficult, often impossible, to keep them apart. But manifestly there are benefits to government patronage of the arts, in the form of grants, visibility, encouragement, reward, and even celebrity.