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Critical Appreciation

Compare the following two poems, which present contrasting views about the value of poetry and poets.

Many use poetry to express their feelings, thoughts and emotions, talk about what they want, try to show themselves on a piece of paper. But it is rare to see someone ask themselves what actually is poetry, especially in the form of a poem. But this is exactly what Elizabeth Alexander and Basil Bunting do, they try to express what they feel about poetry and what it actually is. Both of them feel that poetry is a spontaneous piece, that appears just because of human will. Yet, they choose to show it in 2 drasticly different settings: where Alexander chose to portray her poem as if she was giving a presentation or a lesson to her students, Bunting chose a very satirical setting, where a “Chairman” scolds over a worker and his passion for poetry.

Starting with Elizabeth Alexander's work, we immediately see that “Poetry... is idiosyncratic”. She says that a poem is a spontaneous work of an individual, appearing just like that. It is a piece where “we are ourselves”, where we can truly express what and how we feel. It is in fact, a short piece of writing through which one paints a small portrait of himself, which everyone can see and read. Poetry can be a vast field, on which we can do and show whatever we want. But writing a poem is not only about just portraying yourself, it is a journey into himself and back. If one would want to write a poem, he would need to look into himself, and only then he could put on paper what he would find during his journey. Because a poem is not only about the general idea, but the little details we don't notice at first, the small things we “find in the dirt in the corner, overhear on the bus”. It's a collection of events and ideas that we don't pay attention at first, and towards which we need to come back to see them. To emphasise her point, the author even plays upon the saying “the Devil is in the details”, and writing instead “God in the details”, giving us a much more positive and holy view of poetry. For her, poetry is the only way to feel progress, the only way to truly say something and the main motor behind out journey into ourselves. This is when emotions start to get the hold of her and her lesson, because her “voice is rising”. But it could not only be her voice during a presentation, but also her poetic voice, nearing a conclusion, starts to be more and more powerful. With this rising voice, Alexander addresses one of the main misconceptions about poetry: most people think that poetry is there just for “love, love, love” and small yet sad stories, but it is not. In fact, for the author, “Poetry... is the human voice”, a human speaking to another one through a piece of paper. Because essentially, poetry is about dialogue between the reader and the author, which should be one of the most interesting things to us, because if we aren't interested in each other, what is.

Basil Bunting adopts a much harsher tone when talking about poetry. He chose to convey his point through satire, namely through the words of a certain Chairman who is criticising his worker's love for poetry. With the progressively harsher critique of poetry, Bunting criticises today's society for being so superficial, concentrated on work, money and being efficient. The poem starts off with the Chairman’s statement “Poetry? It's a hobby.”. Where it might be true, poetry can be essentially used as a distraction, it is placed besides model trains and breeding pigeons, completely disregarding it's cultural aspect. The Chairman decides to focus on what that man could be doing something that he would deem productive, like advertising soap. He even suggests that poetry isn't truly an art and that his “ten year old/ can do it and rhyme”. Bunting references here the belief that some have when they read poetry: often after reading a poem, some say to themselves “I could have done that easily, why I'm not a famous poet?”. But the reality is harsher than it seems: poetry takes practice and skill, and it is the art of language. Yet, in the eyes of the Chairman poetry is unworthy of it's esteem because of how “unproductive” it is. Instead of doing something material, like driving a bus, working in the office or creating goods, Tom is “wasting” his potential on poetry. Because of the seaming lack of materiality in poetry, the Chairman just refuses to pay this man for his poetic work on the reason that if he would do that, he would put poets on the same level as bus drivers, whom he deems more worthy of their pay than poets. He says “How could I look a bus conductor/ in the face/ if I paid you twelve pounds?”, just if it would be a shame for him to pay a poet. And to make his point, this Chairman presents his position: “I get three thousand and expenses,/ a car, vouchers,/ but I'm an accountant.”, giving us the impression that he judges himself superior and more worthy of his pay than the titular poet Tom. Bunting also criticises the unquestioned obedience of the workers towards the Chairman: “They do what I tell them, my company.”, and contrasts it with the consciousness and the questioning coming from a poet: “What do you do?/ Nasty little words, nasty long words, it's unhealthy.” The words “nasty” and “unhealthy” give the reader the impression that poetry is in fact harmful and noxious. The Chairman even contrasts the poets with what the capitalist society deems as the worst: “They're Reds, addicts,/ all delinquents./ What you write is rot.”, as if poetry was a cancer to the society. But the Chairman's last words truly hit more him than the poet: “Mr. Hines says so, and he's a schoolteacher,/ he ought to know.”. Instead of making his own opinion, the Chairman decided to stay in the dark and just accept what others tell him, showing how boxed down is the capitalist society, always thinking about profit and money, unwilling to think outside of their box of money.

What we can find in both of these poems is a critique of people vastly ignoring the true nature of poetry: the society largely ignores that it can talk about more than just love, and just lose attention to it, and some just plainly attack it because of it's immaterialness. What the society fails to realise, according to these 2 poems, is that poetry is an art and a dialogue, it's a journey of one within himself to have his own opinion, and not only just absorb ideas and opinions from other people.