

JOHN TAGLIABUE AND THE OFFICE OF THE POET

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IN A LATE POEM JOHN TAGLIABUE describes himself in the act of “Taking a Wooden Statue of Don Quixote Down from the Top of My School Office Bookshelf as I Am about to Retire and Transpose Him to a Secret Place,” and then adds, “We Need His Courage, I Vow Eternal Support.” Many poets write in some sort of private space—a study, an enclosed porch, some sort of “room of one’s own”—and those who work as college professors often write in an office supplied by their college or university. In this poem Tagliabue, who taught from 1953–1989 at Bates College in Lewiston, Maine, addresses the wooden statue of Quixote in words that apply to himself and to any of us:

Whatever you do
whatever is done to you
by all the materialist skeptics confused mundane
distracted ones
of the turning world, somewhat or completely blind
to what
you see, don’t
don’t give up, Quixote! where would the Golden
Age go
then, where where
would our increasing heightening nobility potency
be
without your
dignity?
[...]
irrevocable one, dearest wreck, loftiest uncle, don’t
give up
the Golden belief in Us.¹

¹ John Tagliabue, *New and Selected Poems* (Orono, ME: The National Poetry Foundation, 1997) 357. Further page references to this work will appear in parentheses within the text.

This gentle, humorous poem responds to Quixote as exemplar of the Golden Age of Spanish literary history, but more significantly recognizes in the old knight an attitude of reverence for what is noble or golden in any of us, difficult as those things often are to discern in a turning world dominated by the material, the skeptical, the mundane, the distracted. The office of the poet may denote a physical space, but another meaning lies in the word's derivation from the Latin *officium* and the earliest English definitions cited by the Oxford English Dictionary: a service, a kindness, an attention done to or for someone, as in "I appreciate your good *offices* to my uncle"; somewhat later the word comes to mean a duty or obligation attaching to one's position or station, so that one performs one's office, a meaning that takes the Latin *officium* back to roots in *opus* and *facere*, "to do" one's "work." What, then, is the office of the poet? What service does the poet render, what kinds of attention does the poet bestow? If we think of certain names—Homer, Shakespeare, Yeats, Blake, Donne, Rilke, Dickinson, Whitman—the question may seem bizarre. To attempt to list the "services" incumbent upon a poet, to draw up a kind of job description, would be to trivialize or to diminish what it is that makes certain poems matter so largely to so many of us, to reduce the amplitude of those poets to whom we turn again, and again. But if, for the moment, we bracket such names and turn our attention to the less than famous (i.e., the overwhelming majority)—can we then speak of the office of the poet? Why, or how, can such poets matter?

The question is still far too broad, for poets, like dancers or painters or musicians, matter in very different ways. So let me narrow my focus still further: why, or how, did John Tagliabue perform the office of the poet? Why does he matter? Tagliabue emigrated to the United States with his parents from Cantù, Italy (near Lake Como) in 1927, when he was four years old, and grew up in New Jersey, where his father ran a restaurant at which his young son would dance for the customers. He earned his BA and MA in English at Columbia, where his favorite professor was Mark Van Doren, and his classmates included Allen Ginsberg (a lifelong friend) and Jack Kerouac. Over the course of his long career, he earned six Fulbright awards and taught in Spain, Italy, Greece, Lebanon, Indonesia, Japan, China and Brazil. His six books include *Poems* (1950), *A Japanese Journal* (1966), *The Buddha Up-roar* (1968), *The Doorless Door* (1970), *The Great Day: Poems, 1962-1983* and *New and Selected Poems: 1942-1997*. Some of his poems appeared in prestigious journals such as *The American Scholar* and *The Kenyon Review*,

and Garrison Keillor included Tagliabue in his popular anthology *Good Poems*, but none of the major anthologies includes his poems. A search of the MLA database elicits almost no critical response to his work. His books were published by small presses, and the big final collection (*New and Selected*) by the National Poetry Foundation. So Tagliabue occupies that space between the major, anthologized poets and the second tier, those who may do very good work but are largely unknown.

To return to my question: how did John Tagliabue fulfill the office of the poet? In *The Will to Power* (Book III, fragment 821), Nietzsche writes, “What is essential in art remains its perfection of existence, its production of perfection and plenitude; art is essentially *affirmation, blessing, deification of existence*” (Nietzsche’s emphasis). The next fragment, 822, is better known: “For a philosopher to say, ‘the good and the beautiful are one,’ is infamy; if he goes on to add, ‘also the true,’ one ought to thrash him. Truth is ugly. We possess *art lest we perish of the truth*” (Nietzsche’s emphasis).² That last line is often rendered in English as “We have art in order not to die of the truth,”³ and though the claim may seem flamboyant, over the top—a direct contradiction of Keats’s claim that “Beauty is truth, truth beauty”—we take Nietzsche’s point: the truth is often ugly, as the evening news regularly demonstrates. Some of the ugly truths of the world can kill us, suddenly or slowly, and in certain circumstances any of the arts might save one’s life, or at least make one’s life more bearable by offering a small light that the surrounding darkness cannot destroy. In what follows I am going to suggest that John Tagliabue’s poems point toward the kind of perfection and plenitude that Nietzsche mentions, and that Tagliabue fulfills the office of the poet by engaging in repeated acts of “affirmation” and “blessing.”

In the Quixote poem, the “truth” consists in the merely material, the always skeptical, the confused, the mundane—the “truth” includes the world of war, crime, avarice, suffering, diseases, pain, and cruelty. If such truth were all that the world held, and all that we could see, then many of us would

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1968) 434–35.

³ See, for example, Albert Camus’s *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1959) 69, where the line is rendered: “we have art in order not to die of the truth.” In her popular novel *The Goldfinch*, Donna Tartt uses the line as the epigraph to part five, though her translation changes one preposition: “We have art in order not to die from the truth.” In *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche writes, “Wir haben die *Kunst*, damit wir *nicht an der Wahrheit zugrunde gehen*” (Nietzsche’s emphasis).

“perish of the truth,” as Nietzsche puts it—as indeed many of us do perish of the truth. The office of the poet, as John Tagliabue fulfills it, is to offer the reader another way of looking at the world, another way of paying attention, vivid and funny and reverential, full of odd juxtapositions, reminding us that although the world may seem to be in the hands of the “lawyers and parliamentarians,” it also includes the “poets and priests,”⁴ who see things somewhat differently. In his *Journal* for 5 August 1851, Thoreau writes, “The question is not what you look at, but what you see,”⁵ and though they may look at the same world, the lawyer and the poet see different things. In the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas, Christ’s disciples ask him “When will the kingdom come?” and Christ answers, “The kingdom of the Father is spread upon the earth and men do not see it.”⁶ This is startling news: rather than something prophesied to occur in the future, rather than something not of this world, the kingdom of heaven lies right in front of us, in the midst of this world of suffering and death and violence; it is all around us, right here, right now. Nietzsche’s “art” and “truth” are not mere polar opposites, but are entangled each with the other. On the banks of Maine’s polluted Androscoggin River the poet glimpses the sacred; in the post-industrial, economically depressed mill town of Lewiston, Maine, his eye discerns the celestial.

From a certain perspective, these claims can sound fatuously New Age, and some of the small critical response to Tagliabue has been negative. In his review of *New and Selected Poems*, Norman Friedman finds in its 330 pages “a certain sameness of diction, rhythm, and mood,” and concludes that the poet “does not give off the air of a meticulous craftsman.”⁷ For Friedman, Tagliabue seems utterly unremarkable: he is a poet of “modest self-awareness and anchoring in ordinary life,” and his poems depict “a modest, non-aggressive persona, one who can reflect upon himself, acknowledge and accept his own ambivalences, come to terms with his negative side and feelings of failure, and nevertheless emerge with a positive feeling.” Friedman’s Tagliabue sounds like someone who’s embraced Norman Vincent Peale and the quiet virtues of suburban middle-class life. Friedman is wrong, yet one

⁴ John Tagliabue, *The Great Day: Poems, 1962–1983* (Plainfield, IN: Alembic, 1984) 14. Further page references to this work will appear in parentheses within the text.

⁵ The Walden Woods Project. <https://www.walden.org/Library/Quotation/Observation>.

⁶ <http://gnosis.org/naghamm/gosthom.html>.

⁷ Norman Friedman, “Tagliabue and Cummings: A Comparative Review of John Tagliabue’s *New and Selected Poems: 1942–1997* (The National Poetry Foundation, University of Maine, Orono, 1997),” *Spring: The Journal of the E.E. Cummings Society* 9 (October 2000): 171–74.

can see how Tagliabue might elicit such a response from someone who looks without seeing. His is not an academic or dense poetry—the poems feel quick, off-the-cuff, and his playfulness can sometimes seem silly, light, frivolous. But then Oscar Wilde could seem silly, light, frivolous, and Wilde was deadly serious. So is Tagliabue.

His more careful readers have been far more positive. On the back cover of the *New and Selected Poems*, Amy Clampitt states, “John Tagliabue writes out of a deeply sacramental sense of nature and history. He is, moreover, that rare person to whom poetry appears to come as naturally as breathing. It comes to this reader, poem by poem, as a Franciscan act of courtesy and praise.” The back-cover blurbs on *The Great Day* come from poets as different as Gwendolyn Brooks, Hayden Carruth, John Ciardi, David Ignatow, Denise Levertov and X.J. Kennedy, for each of whom Tagliabue is a poet who matters.

How then, specifically, does this poet fulfill his office? In his Foreword to *The Great Day*, Tagliabue writes that a poem cannot sing “unless [it] reveals and bows to something greater than itself” (*Day 14*). The precise identity of that “something greater” may remain mysterious, but Tagliabue is always aware of it, and always honors its fundamental importance. In an untitled poem from his *Japanese Journal*, he asks,

To
 what
 do
 we
 pay
 homage
 as
 we
 go
 toward
 our
 spiritual
 home?
 To
 what
 do
 we
 bow

as
 we
 grow
 smaller
 and
 smaller
 until
 we
 grow
 bright
 enough
 to
 enter
 the
 universe? (*New 67*)

This simple poem plays on the tension between acts of self-diminishment—paying homage, bowing, growing smaller—and their consequence: growing bright enough to leave behind the mundane and to enter the universe. The poem offers no answer to its two questions, but plainly, the things that most of us pay homage to and bow before are things that distend the self, leaving us far too large to enter the universe. Then, as if to make sure that the poetic speaker (as well as the reader included in the poem’s “we”) doesn’t become too full of himself and his shamanic wisdom, the following poem, “When Sometimes Awkwardness Is Almost Fitting,” pulls us back to the things of this world in a way that William Carlos Williams would appreciate:

My
 long
 woolen
 under
 wear
 follow
 me
 around
 a
 little
 loosely
 like
 some

inexact
 but
 pleasing
 thought. (*New* 67)

We find a similar juxtaposition of the spiritual/cosmic and the gently comic in “The Praise of Asia Begun,” from *The Buddha Uproar*. In Part One of that poem we read:

Towards
 which dream
 are you
 dreaming?
 your head
 like a flower
 has many aspects,
 like a stone
 has many hours,
 our joy like
 showers gives rise
 to more drums and art (*New* 47)

The poem’s opening question reminds us of the earlier “To what do we pay homage?” but here the speaker is addressing his beloved and appreciating the brightness and fecundity of her “many aspects.” A major part of Tagliabue’s strength as a poet consists in the disarming humor with which he approaches big subjects like sexual desire or God. His poem “‘The Evidence of Consumption’ Chapter from Vidyakara’s SUBHASITARATNAKOSA” begins with a Whitmanesque catalogue of participles: the speaker is “battered,” “wending,” “walking,” “falling,” “reciting,” and “desperately desiring more” of many disparate things: “eruptions,” “sweating,” “hitting it off,” “lecturing naked,” “sonatas for the jig.” This battered speaker is feverish, beside himself, until the main clause in the poem’s next line hits him, and

memories returned to him like the jangling of
 anklet bracelets
 which included her and she was exposing her
 full presence again
 he kept saying I don’t want to be gone long
 he did a handstand

really fast cartwheels
 suggesting flowers until he rolled that way like
 a smelly chariot
 uphill
 and she grabbed him and said I see you're here again.⁸

The poem's structure is reminiscent of Shakespeare's sonnet "When, in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes," whose speaker is similarly despondent until "haply" he thinks of "thee," the one whose love brings such wealth that he scorns to change his state with kings. Haply for Tagliabue's speaker, one of the memories that return to him includes "her," the one who can make him do handstands and cartwheels, the one who, as soon as he says "I don't want to be gone long," can grab him and say "I see you're here again." The diction and imagery may be closer to Krazy Kat than to Shakespeare, but in Tagliabue's imagination such connections are not uncommon.

In Tagliabue's poems topics of fundamental seriousness often rest alongside moments of self-deprecation or levity. In an untitled poem from *The Buddha Uproar* that begins by linking flowers with "Bodhi," the awakened consciousness attained by the Buddha, an "if/then" structure creates a childlike circularity that ends in laughter at, as well as with, the wise fool:

If blossomings
 remind me of Bodhi
 and Bodhi reminds me of Buddha
 and Buddha reminds me of memory
 and memory reminds me of you
 then you remind me of blossomings
 and days are all like flowers;
 how radiant the dancing gods
 as they reveal time in their hands!
 how daring the glorious reader
 as she laughs at the religious fool.

The way in which religious feeling is linked with an *other*, with "you," is typical for Tagliabue, who writes in that same volume, "If we are religious we awaken our enthusiasm, we awaken / the sleeping gods in each other."

⁸ John Tagliabue, *The Buddha Uproar* (Santa Cruz, CA: Kayak, 1968) no pagination.

Tagliabue's concerns are often religious, in the most generous and expansive sense of that term, but he can also be political, as in a poem that begins with a memory of Kafka's great story "In the Penal Colony," in which a machine inscribes the prisoner's sentence on his skin before his death. Kafka's story triggers in the poet's mind an image of "many in the dark sitting / for hours and hours, for years," watching television and "being / imprinted everywhere / on the body by the vibrations of the TV machines," so that "the body is being made to flicker / to flounder to shake in / sickness or staleness" (*New* 269–70). In another poem, "American Complicated with Integrity: Homage to Muriel," Tagliabue sympathizes with his students who find it "difficult to see in this harsh light, in the glare of / this machine place / with the ferocity of blandness," and who struggle to resist joining the "tired people almost well adjusted / to their lack of direction and / their routine," a line in which the adverb "almost" ratchets up the desperation of the situation. But despair should never be our strategy, and the poem's speaker then points to a clear example of political commitment and resistance: "but look at Muriel [Rukeyser] I say to my students, / ... / her poems have collected our hope and power, to walk with / her and them makes us see bold incorrigible / indivisible Whitman ahead" (*New* 128–29). If, amid the materialism and ferocious blandness that constitute so much of our everyday culture, that same culture can still produce a Rukeyser or a Whitman, then hope and commitment are not mere idle fantasy.

Among Tagliabue's most moving and personal poems are those in the beautiful "Sequence: Poems in Praise of My Father," many of them written during or shortly after his father's dying, some of them drawing on old memories or visits from his father in dreams, as in "Reunion," where his father announces: "I heard you were having some pasta asciutta / and I decided to come back" (*New* 137). The grateful son honours his father's memory: "You were fully here / You were largely present / You do not hang around like a Puritan or a Stoical Corpse / saying do this or finish that" (*New* 138–39), and then promises: "I will dance in your restaurant for the rest of my life" (139). One of the last poems in that series, "Exits, Surprises, Entrances," imagines life, death, and the afterlife as a vast cosmic drama in which "we enter the great galaxy / of the many bees and fish and sandpipers," where "we perform our imitations" amid the myriad others who "are imitating us," and it's really all a marvelous show in which we

[...] take a rabbit out of a hat,
 invent an alphabet,
 walk on a tight rope,
 make higher mathematics, interpret metaphors, eat,
 sleep, eat, make love[.]

Even the great galaxy itself, like each of us or “like a Troupe of Actors / performs for a few years / (accompanied by saints, angels, imitators, wonderers)” amid “the traveling wind” (*New* 139–40).

In Tagliabue’s imagination the cosmic sits alongside the pedestrian and quotidian, which are often depicted with a humor that is unexpected, subtle, sometimes wacky. In one of a series of poems celebrating the fecundity of summer vegetable gardens, the speaker sees a potato as “a Willendorf Venus, / all bumpy, / Bulky, earth mother as the professorial / mythology books say,” then pulls back from the image—“I prefer potatoes (to the professorial / abstractions I mean)”—and then lets the phrase “professorial abstractions” coalesce in an image of Wittgenstein, which then combines hilariously with the Willendorf potato: “Wittgenstein and the Willendorf Venus are making out” (*New* 153).

In “just a few scenes from an autobiography,” the juxtapositions create a more subtle humour: “I eat noodles with the Emperor’s brother / in a school basement,” the speaker tells us, and we wonder why he’s with the Emperor’s brother, and not the Emperor, and why they’re eating noodles (the food of the masses) in a school basement. Instead of answering our questions, though, the speaker tells us what they talked about: “he tells me about baseball, / I tell him about Gagaku [a type of Japanese classical music]” (*New* 175), and we’re left wondering what in the world baseball has to do with Gagaku, and how the conversation proceeded. It is difficult to imagine a poet less interested in American professional sports than Tagliabue, and the title of one of his late poems is enough by itself to make us laugh: “for Cousin Paul Tagliabue, Commissioner of the NFL” (*New* 363—they really were cousins).

John Tagliabue persuades me that Nietzsche is at least partly right, for Tagliabue’s poems are essentially concerned with a consciousness of affirmation and blessing, with what Nietzsche calls “the production of plenitude.” In “We picture your migration,” the poet begins with a basic question (“Who am I?”) that he can answer only indirectly, but in that indirect answer he affirms the existence of a “current” and a “direction” that each of us is connected to, whether consciously or not, and that extends to the earliest members of

our species and, beyond them, to other species: “drifting” late at night amid “books, / stars and the beginnings of sleep,” the speaker feels a “current” that at first doesn’t seem to reach anywhere, yet nonetheless conveys “a sense of direction” that leads to recognition:

there is the space within the dreams of the animals
and I signal to it,
my brothers at the conclave at Altamira respond
making pictures on the wall. (*New* 164)

That sense of participation in “the current,” that sense of belonging to the world, carries with it as corollary a generosity toward those who don’t share the poet’s values. Most people would rather watch TV than read poetry, so how shall we interpret that preference? Shall we bemoan it, shall we berate them, shall we pronounce our own superiority? No. In “Where Are All the Poetry Books in Your House?” the speaker explains that it’s really OK if “very few people seem to be interested in /poetry” because

people are really interested in the poetry which is
before the words and
after the words of
the poetry; they have their needs but it takes them a
long time to get around
to it; poets don’t suffer because of this, they just have
a certain priestly privacy and
send their regards and hiccups and prayers to
future audiences. (*New* 237)

Tagliabue brings that same generosity of spirit, that same sense of plenitude, to his poems on teaching. In a poem that takes its title from Shakespeare, “Sonnet 18: ‘So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee,’” the speaker reflects on his final creative writing class and the fecund combination of ignorance (“we don’t know”), encouragement, and acknowledgment that animate any lively classroom: “We don’t know exactly / what’s going to happen” when we do any number of things: “take up the pen,” or “touch the woman,” or “look at the flowering magnolia / when the sky is all saffron and golden.” What’s going to happen on the morning when the teacher begins his last writing class? “I encourage them,” he tells us, as he wonders “who are they,” and then adds,

“they often wonder too.” Yet amid that great unknowing, “what is precisely called forth now,” among teacher and students, is the “exact beginning of / acknowledgement” (*New* 227).

In “A Not Insignificant Small Part of a Great Fable” the speaker reflects on how literature “extends” and “dramatizes” the lives of its readers, connecting them in one grand mysterious heart. “My heart goes out,” he tells us, to Kafka’s Gregor Samsa, to Flaubert’s Emma Bovary, to Hamlet, “and so I am extended, and so we are dramatized” in the process of reading, with the result that we come to recognize that

as a matter of
 very complex intimate very fabulous fact it is one
 heart
 that we are lyrically
 a part of. (*New* 283)

Nietzsche tells us that without the saving grace of art, we are liable to perish from the ugly truths of the world, and William Carlos Williams would seem to agree when he writes, “It is difficult / to get the news from poems / yet men die miserably every day / for lack / of what is found there.”⁹ One aspect of the office of the poet, then, is to offer the reader a way of seeing, a way of paying attention, that illuminates what Nietzsche somewhat extravagantly calls the “deification of existence,” which I take to mean an aspect of existence that most of us discern only with difficulty, and often with skepticism, occupied as we are with the mundane, material world that presses upon us so insistently. A poet can lose sight of that aspect of the office. Albert Glover, who was a student in the seminar on myth that Charles Olson taught at SUNY Buffalo in 1964, recalls an afternoon in that seminar when the Beat poet Gregory Corso

made a disruptive appearance, [...] challenging the assembled students to match him in reciting from memory lines of Shelley (or perhaps by extension any poet) and hearing only universal silence[;] Corso began pointing out with increasing intensity that “we are all on death row” and that he was “Captain Poetry.” Finally he turned to Olson: “Aren’t I Captain Poetry, Charles?” “Yes,” Olson replied. “Then what should I do?” And without missing a beat Olson said calmly and with some humour: “report for duty.”¹⁰

Corso's question ("what should I do?") suggests a poet unsure of his office, while Olson's gentle reply suggests the opposite. The office of the poet entails a duty, even an obligation, not only to the possibilities inherent in one's language and one's poetic tradition (we should all be able to recite from memory lines of Shelley), but more significantly to the kind of awareness and attention that lie at the root meaning of the word *aesthetic*, i.e., the Greek *aisthanesthai*, "to perceive," the opposite of an-aesthetic (anaesthetic), the failure or inability to perceive or to pay attention. In his poems John Tagliabue shows us—amid our confusions and distractions—how to see, and not merely look. He reminds us how to pay attention to what matters, and so fulfills the office of the poet.

⁹ William Carlos Williams, *Collected Poems, Vol. 2, 1939–1962*, ed. Christopher MacGowan (New York: New Directions, 1988) 318.

¹⁰ Kenneth Warren, *Captain Poetry's Sucker Punch: A Guide to the Homeric Punkhole* (Buffalo: BlazeVOX, 2012) back cover.