

MARK HALLIDAY

Moose Failure

SOMETIMES ART does not save us. Sometimes it is even part of the problem. And I mean even good art.

“The Moose” . . . I tend to think poetry will rescue the hour, I tend to think the presence of a good deft reverberating poem will transform the conversation and refresh the air of the room and refresh the mind so that it can move among memories and intimations and words more living than the word “refresh” feels to me at this moment. But the poem won’t automatically do this for the talk and the room and the mind.

“The Moose” . . . It was the day before Christmas vacation and I had this 11th grade class to teach. We had left *The Scarlet Letter* dusty and scabbed in the ditches of the preceding days and I needed something to teach. Of course I could have let the hour fritter itself into noise and paper missiles and candy but I didn’t want to. Not that I felt a high honorable devotion to the dignity of education, not that I haven’t let many class hours fizzle and fuzzle and fall to fried fluff; but on this day with this particular class of un-stupid students it just seemed too easy and too obvious to allow mere noisy nothing to happen for the hour.

But did I have a wise plan? Perhaps a sly meditated segue from Hester Prynne to another heroine of a later story, instigating a startling and revelatory comparison? Women and self-assertion . . . Kate Chopin . . . Women and identity — women and wholeness — women, women . . . I had no wise plan. It was the week before Christmas and everything had been a rainy frenzy of assigning papers and grading papers and flagrant flagellation of my credit card in a dozen retail outlets and I was not the teacher who despite all that also mapped a fine scheme for classes on the Friday. Yet with these 11th graders I wasn’t quite in the mood of what-the-hell, “Can’t we just have fun, Mr. H.?” So what happened was — “The Moose”.

Because we had these huge Nortons. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* — recently I had been badgering these students not to “accidentally” arrive in class without the huge book, so they did have it on their desks on this pre-Christmas Friday, though they were not pining to open the Norton. But I thought: *God, the Norton, right here in our hands, with its hundreds of poems! Great poems! And fairly good ones . . . Present with us in this room, waiting to be breathed.* Because of this feeling that a

good poem is a kind of sacred oxygen. Because art gives life. Because I love.

So I thought, *let us calmly inhale a great poem from the Norton and this room of goofy noise will become a place of meaning. Let it be something that will not sound ancient in the students' ears, let it not feel Hawthorne and mossy and Back-Then-ish . . .* I flipped to the end of the Norton and upon "The Moose" did my eye fall. Elizabeth Bishop: good poet, good enough so that 11th graders ought to know about her. Maybe? What must an 11th-grader definitely learn about poetry since 1945? Definitely? Moose? Young people are interested in animals, aren't they? My five-year-old son would want to hear any story about a moose; yes but these students were sixteen and seventeen. Why could I not think of a sexy poem? In the Norton? Minutes were passing.

Loudly and as-if-confidently I announced "The Moose". Because — didn't I admire this poem a lot in 1979? I believe I did. And isn't it about society vs. Nature? And isn't that a very big deal in American literature and isn't that what I am teaching?

Bravely then did I begin reading "The Moose" aloud. Rapidly oh rapidly then did my confidence crumple and spirit quail. Because "The Moose" emerged in its opening stanzas as something SO calm, so awfully calm as to be irredeemably grownup and descriptive and dating from Back Then. "The Moose" was sounding unsexy to an incredible degree. The stanzas resounded drily in the silence which I had imposed upon the room by exertion of glaring authority, and within seconds I felt hatred for Elizabeth Bishop. Obviously she had not written "The Moose" with my class in mind and I felt this was terribly selfish of her. Great poet? Where was the sexy intensity? Bishop showed no awareness that this was the Friday before Christmas vacation.

With a low-humming cramping pain of regret in my abdominal region I saw three or four of the better students actually trying to get their heads into "The Moose," actually trying for my sake or poetry's sake or for the honor of the school to frown their way into what some dead lady (did he say she was a *bishop*?) had written supposedly about some moose except there wasn't any moose — not yet — there was just this old bus driving along some old cold highway:

past clapboard farmhouses
and neat, clapboard churches,
bleached, ridged as clamshells,
past twin silver birches, . . .

I wanted to shout “She KNOWS that ‘clapboard’ is the most boring word in the English language, she totally knows this, that’s part of the POINT.” Maybe I did shout this but not convincingly because by now I was so filled with loathing for the poem:

. . . and the smell of salt hay.
An iron bridge trembles
and a loose plank rattles
but doesn’t give way.

Planks in me gave way. Quit! Quit! Cut your losses! No, no, I would not quit. Someone had blundered, but I would ride on into the jaws of pedagogical failure. I would die teaching. “He died with his Norton open.” I sensed that a final Christmas vacation awaits us all, and the only glory will be how much you gave to life and whether your family can say about you that you taught real literature even on the Friday. Onward! To the brink. I spoke between stanzas about the atmosphere and feeling of a long rural bus trip and I mustered a modicum of sincere sincerity about how well Bishop evokes this; but as I spoke I heard sardonic inner voices pointing out that my students had never experienced a long rural bus trip, and suggesting that they were not familiar with the verb “to evoke”.

Each stanza now looked like a six-month job of loading cinderblocks onto dump trucks.

Moonlight as we enter
the New Brunswick woods,
hairy, scratchy, splintery;

chilly hatred I now felt for New Brunswick, for Bishop, for descriptiveness, and especially for any critic who could wax on in print about how marvelously Bishop’s adjectives evoke. And yet — the part about the voices of the grandparents at the rear of the bus seemed so lovely-human in 1979 and if it WAS lovely-human then it must be so forever, must it not, hence it must still be superbly human on this Friday before Christmas, must it not? Teacher, show thy human love! Grandparents musing on a bus at night were once sixteen-year-old kids fretful for vacation, surely. Let us find the humanity that links us to them and to Eliz—

Then the moose at last stuck its huge shagged head into the poem. Thank God. But it was such a late arrival; too late.

The sweet version of this story I am telling would show a student

reacting in a beautiful ingenuous fresh refreshed way to that moose. “You know,” the sweet student would say, “it’s kind of like . . .” And the intuitive analogy would suddenly crystallize a truth about the reality of the natural and the physical and the sensual and the primitive amid the conventions and routines of humanized life. Hester and Dimmesdale in the forest?

But the teacher, this day, had not created the mood, the atmosphere, the Learning Environment in which such fresh insight must flower from student mouths.

Why, why do we feel
(we all feel) this sweet
sensation of joy?

Joy was not the sensation filling my classroom. The prevailing sensation was “How many more minutes of this?” Moose. Mooseness. I myself, sounding like the engine of a bus, had become a huge and shaggy and alien creature standing in front of the class, temporarily obstructing their progress toward vacation. The moose was I. Me moose, with creaking middleaged antlers. Nature and society, I said, I said it this way and that way, society and Nature; I mentioned Frost’s “The Most of It” and an inner voice of dark fatigue immediately noted that no one in the room would ever remember my mentioning. I thought of mentioning Lawrence’s “Snake” but Lawrence was British and there would be the danger of causing the students to think Lawrence must be American and then needing to dissuade them about this conviction in later encounters and anyway the time was gone, gone, the clock, the shut Nortons, the shuffling — “Have a nice vacation, Mr. H.”

Out they went into American adolescent animal freedom. In the silence of their goneness the classroom became my lair in which my moose wounds could slowly heal. Antlerless and shrunken slouched the teacher, hairy (yet balding), scratchy, splintery, nursing a sense of vast betrayal; Bishop I could now quasi-forgive (only quasi: loose plank, salt hay, clapboard clapboard . . .) — but art itself had crumbled, art itself had deserted from the scene of combat. Deserted from? Or just deserted. *Oh who cares, Mr. H.?*

Betrayed by art.

It was hours before I could turn to a poem and get from it anything like a sweet sensation of joy.