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Dung in an Age of Empire: An Defense of *A Defense of Poetry*

A Defense of Poetry
Gabriel Gudding
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But I am not to be terrified by abuse, or bullied by reviewers, with or without arms.

—Byron

This large castle (to show my improvements in the mathematics) is all built with my own hands, and the materials extracted altogether out of my own person.

—*Spider to the Bee*, *The Battle of the Books*, *Swift*

1. Irish poet Mairead Byrne recently remarked how cognitive linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have shown the chief formula underlying much rhetoric and literary discourse in the history of our republic of letters is the metaphor “argument is war.” And if one writes a 1500 word poem composed in insults entitling it “A Defense of Poetry,” is one not being war-like? And if one then writes a satiric book of insults, grotesquery and lampoon against both the politics of empire and the empire of poetry, and then titles it *A Defense of Poetry*, could it be someone is also decrying a kind of militarism inhering not only within a culture of empire, but within the empire of poetry, as it’s contested, if not outright in the poems, then in the reviews?

1.1. And so it is some poetry has long been about contest, argument, war, insult, shaming. Poetry as “face-off,” as sparring, skirmish, metrical furor, often male-on-male conflict, verbal sport, written combat, careful shouting, goes way back—all the way back in Indo-European literature to the Vedic texts. Some of western literature’s most energetic moments are contained within the genre sub-class of invective, face-off and slamming: Gaius Vallerius Catullus, Martial, greats bits of *Julius Caesar*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Much Ado About Nothing*, “The Battle of Maldon,” where Saxon and Viking insult each other across the Blackwater river, the middle English poem, “The Owl and the Nightingale,” the flyting verses of the great Skalds of Old Norse, such as those in Egil’s Saga and Droplaugarsona Saga, as well as those within the Scots tradition, particularly the “Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedy” and the “Flyting of Montgomerie and Polmart,” the insult poems of the Irish tradition (as drawn from *An Duanaire 1600–1900: Poems of the Dispossessed*, eds. Ó Tuama and Kinsella, Dolmen Press, 1994), and the many many misogynist verses of the 17th and 18th Centuries (e.g., E. Alsop’s 1653 “A Briefe Anatomie of Women: Being an Invective Against, and Apologie for the Bad and Goode of that Sexe,” John Webster’s “An Execration against Whores,” or any number by Dean Swift). In recent centuries, look toward the insult verse of Henry David Thoreau, W. E. B. Du Bois, Ezra Pound, Langston Hughes (“Ask Your Mama”), Anthony Hecht, Barton Sutter, Ray Mizer, Hilaire Belloc, Alan Dugan, Sylvia Plath (“Daddy”), Robert Greacen, Clarence Williams, Amiri Baraka, Bernadette Mayer’s insult poem to Fred Jordan, Wallace Stevens’ “Invective Against Swans” (!), René Depestre’s “[And seven times I strike you on the head...].”

1.1.1. Poetry, it too is often an arena of argument and disgust, just as more often it pretends to be a showground of praise and reverence. There has long been something inherently combative about it, if not in the poetry itself, then in its paratexts, its apologies and reviews. And so I have experienced since the publication of *A Defense of Poetry*, a few uplifting attacks against my intelligence, sanity, and moral character. I should not have made poetry out of the dung, I am told. And why did I make poetry out of Caesar’s first invasion of Britain, Tennyson’s “Charge of the Light Brigade,” the grim history of the state of Oklahoma, the HUAC hearings, Ronald Reagan, strings of insults, the dung, the anus, the rectum, the vulva and the dillywong, and the violence? Not to mention the dung?

1.1.2. The poet Ron Silliman wrote a few weeks ago to congratulate

me on passing through the first rites of passage for a poet: the scathing review. His letter included a number of outtakes from a 1968 review by Robert Sward on Clark Coolidge in *Poetry*: “slippery sort of instant poetry,” “a psychedelic outpouring,” “verbal hop-scotch,” “an inspired centipede,” “no actual imagination” “a dead-end,” “chic, trivial piling up of images,” “finally a bore,” “irrelevant preening,” “self devouring cuteness,” “virtually without voice,” “nothing of any human urgency,” “pointless curios”—all of which, for poor Clark Coolidge’s sake, reminds me of what Swift said: “If the men of wit and genius would resolve never to complain in their works of critics and detractors, the next age would not know that they ever had any.”

1.1.3. Not that I pretend to be a man of wit, but I have with shock realized there are two kinds of reviewers: they who read the book and they who don’t (or can’t) read the book. The latter merely somehow, through the acts of vigorous thumbing and close inspection of title, the spine, city of origin and blurb syntax, discern they either like or do not like the IDEA of the book. Thus far my book has been, in its first two months reviewed by ten writers, only six of whom, I am convinced, read it. One reviewer has called me the “potty mouthed poet” and presumes that “Gabe Gudding finds inspiration in his posterior”; another, whom I suspect did not read the book, writes, “Gabriel Gudding is a fantasist who merges the yearnings of the 17th-century metaphysical poets with the pornographic triumphs of the 20th-century American culture. He plays the repressed puritan who forces the reader to explore his dirty mind in a river of polluted words,” (Joel Gersmann, *Isthmus Books Quarterly*), and another notes wryly that in my book “Nose-picking comes up, as do enemas...,” whereas I am told by a reviewer at Amazon.com that I am emotionally retarded, and there another writes, “And this book is surely the baddest. By baddest I mean the absolute worst.” But none was more illiterate and shocking than Megan Dowdell’s alexical tour de force in the student newspaper of the University of Pittsburgh—at the end of what must have been a very long semester.

1.1.1.3. Maybe the key phrase in Megan Dowdell’s review is “thumbing through.” In any case, were I to listen to reviewers, I’d begin to suspect that to defend my own book would be to support nose-picking or encourage the treatment of mucus as if snot were a class of slushy diamond,

a thing to be mounted on a ring, as if the nose were itself a facial raspberry bush needing to be shaken of its fat and mucal fruits. As if to support this book would be to defend dung flinging, grandmother fucking, sex with the anus, the beer spitting. To defend this book would be to defend the eating of artery rope and hickey blood, to defend a lunch of sphincter, would be to camp near a pizza of nipples, have a cup of cat pus, to have made finally a malodorous puck from the colon candy of one's favorite professor; it would be to lift the skirt of the dean, to eat the maid's warm underclothes, to chew a cartilage muffin made from the nose tips of the reviewer's babies; to defend a chowder of clitorises, to have made eyelid mincemeat, to have planted in brightest April a cold bulb of hymen sausage, we hiked forever through sputum sherry downed with earlobe stew, the eyebrow hair bread before cupcake of lip, swig of sweat with a little bubo coffee and a jello of menses, that jujube of jejunum was delish after the knuckle goulash, esophagus salami, testicle custard, adenoids caviar, the smegma fondues, and we kept hiking through the golden urine brisket, the biscuits of woven eyelash, those labia on the bagels like so much lox, your mother's breast milk milkshake, her dingleberry kernels. But my booky argues nothing like this; there is nothing there depraved, decadent or aberrant. The dung is there, yes, but what of that?

2. Of what use is dung in poetry? Is there not something democratic about the earth itself? Are not fertilizer and manure, for all their dense corruption, at once nourishing and fertile?
 - 2.1. Does any one of us deny a daily or a near daily intimacy with dung? And do we not carry it into the halls of parliament inside a bag God has slung between our thighs? It is there with us always, yet we practice an apartheid against this substance, an apartheid at once so subtle and demoralizing that great havoc is wreaked in our daily life.
 - 2.2. The effort we expend in our avoidance of thoughts about dung is incalculable. Many of us refuse to read about dung. The moral and linguistic trenches and fretworks arrayed against dung are pervasive and seemingly insuperable. Indeed, the very word "shit" begins with the alveo-palatal voiceless fricative onomatopoeic imperative to be quiet: shh!

- 2.3. Many will praise and worship an idealized conception of God, yet the very paste of life cannot go unreviled.
- 2.4. Dung and death, procreation and violence: these are the actual sign posts and borders of life. Rarely do we see them come together except in a battle of sex and shit-throwing in a cemetery.
- 2.5. Shame about dung is a frivolous and gratuitous shame, wasted shame, empty shame. Should not shame serve to correct our action, steer us from immorality and evil, rather than provide us merely a feeling of intense and impending embarrassment about an odorous paste? I submit that inasmuch as the shame of dung is the first impractical shame, it is the beginning of frivolity. What's more, it follows then that those adult pursuits recognized in every age for their frivolity (fashion, for one) are merely embellishments upon, and excrescences of, dung shame. Vanity itself is but a false sense of triumph over one's dung.
- 2.6. Shame of dung is therefore improper shame, insofar as it supplants or is used as a surrogate for proper, useful, substantive shame. Our collective cultural feelings (aversive and prissy) and representations about dung embody, then, a failure of spirituality.
- 2.7. In those people for whom dung is shameful, the depths of disgust and the heights of vanity meet midway at a point called righteousness. And I fucking hate righteousness. Here's your dung poetry, prissy boy! perfect girl!
- 2.8. The fact of the matter is dung has fought back with great artfulness, vitality, craft and agility at precisely those moments in history when proper shame has been suppressed by not only frivolous shame but the cultural features that attend shame, such as violence, officiousness, and the like. This occlusion of proper shame suppresses gratitude, pragmatics, use, and decency. And shame of dung is a sign of their absence.
- 2.9. It is no mistake that those who are officious, militantly decorous, prissy, priggish, and rule-bound are often called "anal-retentive." These are usually, furthermore, either secretively or openly pompous people; pomposity inheres in them, and this is because they suffer from a frivolous and incorrect shame, a shame that supplants true shame.
- 2.10. It could be argued that prissiness is at base a kind of timidity. But dung-based prissiness is a more militant kind of prissiness, insofar as it carries brittle attitudes specifically to procreation and defecation. These attitudes however are typically not obvious or strong enough to express in writing—nor do the prissy wish to see them expressed. It is interesting that the relationship between prissiness and timidity is that prissiness is a virulent timidity of the butt.

- 2.11. So, prissiness is less than an issue of misplaced shame as it is the fear that one's frivolity will be challenged. For who wants to be considered frivolous? Dung is never frivolous, and it is therefore suitable that poetry should be defended by dung. Dung is factual. It is very real, and the dismissal of dung is frivolous insofar as it is futile. The official world is a dungless world.
- 2.12. All of which is not to say that there are not honest and legitimate negative reactions to dung. Dung is after all disgusting. But serious grave and moral and national and political and rural issues arise once what is *physically disgusting* is not understood as something merely physically disgusting, but is instead confused with the aesthetically, morally, and nationally reprehensible.
- 2.13. Prissies believe they are about law and order, when in fact they are merely trying to plant feeble colonies of disgust in inappropriate regions. These prissies are dolts. (That is one class of prissy: the dolt prissy.)
- 2.14. But what are these "inappropriate regions"?: Comedy; the North; Decency; Urbanity; Sanity—anything, that is, outside the realm of television. Television is "the South"; television is prissiness. TV is the South inasmuch as "the South" is a collectively prissy response to wilderness (the swamps of MS and LA, e.g.), the other (the poor, the African-American, the non-Anglo-Saxon, the masculine female, the feminized male), and, well, the facts (reality, e.g.).
- 2.15. Let us be plain: There is something inherently retarded about America. And the reason for this has principally to do with our relationship vis-à-vis our dung.
- 2.16. They who feel frivolous disgust and frivolous shame are put off by dung in poetry. As prissiness is a display of frivolous disgust and/or frivolous shame, so also is machismo a display of resistance to disgust and shame. But insofar as machismo is yet another reactionary response to shame and disgust (with a key additional reaction to fear), I must classify it as a type of prissiness.
- 2.17. By contrast, there is something very "can do" about dung. Dog-faced and down-at-heel, dung is nothing, yet from it issues life. It is a kind of womb therefore. It is a cross between a paste, on the one hand, and a womb on the other. Indeed, the rectum, whence comes dung, is itself a shadow womb. Metonymically then, a dung is a boy. Or a dung is a girl. Dung are therefore shadow children, adumbrated offspring. The procreative aspects of dung hinge not only upon its biological properties, but its metaphorical properties. It is a rich and confusing substance. So, out of respect for its complexity, its signification, its

use, and our long companionship with it, we ought not either wrinkle or raise our noses at it.

- 2.18. A perfect example of denial-of-dung art is Nashville country music. Yet even there we see defecatory qualities: the moaning of the mullet cuts, the tinkling of the steel guitars.
 - 2.19. Beyond shame, there is a very strong fear associated with dung. Consider that a creature is, when defecating, very vulnerable to attack. To many idiots, then, dung is what one produces when one is weak, it is a product of weakness. But some, I think, feel that a dung is an expelled wound. That in surviving the act of defecation without being clubbed, the dung represents a wound one had avoided altogether. It is a wound at once avoided and voided.
 - 2.20. Thus, given his druthers, mankind will choose to dung inside a fortified structure. You might argue that the fact that we chose to situate our dunging machines inside houses is indicative only of a preference to dung in a warm room, outhouses being cold more than half the year in those climes where the flushing dung bowl was devised. I concede this is a strong argument: it does seem axiomatic that one is more likely to freeze to death in an outhouse than be clubbed to death in it. But I refute this theory.
3. If we say, for instance, war is built upon the anus, and that religion is founded upon that muscled ring, the anus then becomes military, poetic, liturgical, and imperialistic. We may say then that the anus is the redoubt of comedy, but who would believe us? Let us instead merely suggest it is the organ of divestment, and as such it is the very seat and anchor of practicality. In the South, the men are smarmy and the women are prissy. I do not like the smarminess and the prissiness of the South. Of course, they do not have anuses down there. The women do not have anuses in their buttocks. Southern women do not have sphincters. They are all vulva. Yet there is a wasp who guards everyone's anus—especially in the South. That is to say, each anus has a wasp that guards it. It is a protective wasp. When things pass out of it, or when someone's finger goes in, the wasp is there, taking notes, watching, ready to Kung Fu to protect the trade the rectum makes with the world. The little wasp then floats behind us making notes in the steam and gas of us, and enjoys the sound of our trumpet. For the trumpet's sound is a cousin to the wasp's sound. Subtitles are a field one can run in. They hang at the back of the title, guarding the trade between the title and the world. They are the substance of a sign, the thing itself. And isn't it so? In the brick, there is a subtitle. In the prickling Norse whirr of chilly hemp, the taut curl in the straight strung rope, in that spiral umbilicalling one thing to another thing, there is a subtitle. It's an old key

feature of menippean satire: contents of the rectum rocket out in their subtletiness—without subtlety—at certain tight and critical moments in history, I imagine, following Bakhtin, mostly at those points when life is ridiculously officious and harmful. The foisting of the anus has then a purpose: It is the ring of shame. It is the ring of shock. It is the ringydingy of fun. A key idea in the book, *A Defense of Poetry* by Gabriel Gudding, is that beauty is really a camouflage for the anus. Think of the kingly peacock, how it moons us constantly, showing us its big throbbing anus. Yet do we notice its small dark donut of expulsion? No, we see only its fan. Generally, the anus is a ring too small to be a crown. But if it weren't, our president would wear one: a big ropey sphincter pulsing on his hair like an odorous tonsure! The anus as that which opposes our mouth, the mouth being seat of the "voice," the "voice" being the signature of a poet, the anus being the mouth of the seat, the seat being the proper resting place for a poet (as opposed to the laurels). The anus, which speaks in a syntax of bilabial trills, is the very voice of the applicable, valid world, the spot of spiritual use beyond vain derision. It is a rubbery cross between a lip and an eye, and it speaks more than it sees.

- 3.1. "Beauty" is camouflage for the anus. The denied anus is the fount of frivolity, vanity, violence and war.
4. Is not the grotesque, by the very instability with which it skirts revulsion and laughter, an effective way to treat suffering? Does not the grotesque present us with the limits of our taste, our sense of propriety, our very conceptions of what we can endure, and says, "We suffer from the east of us to the west of us; let's come at this a different way: try enduring!" End making an icon of suffering; stop the false solemnity of weeping. The more we look at urine, the less we weep. If as Bakhtin noted the grotesque body is the collective body, what, I say, is the use of the grotesque in poetry?
- 4.1. To insist along with Patrick Kavanagh that we aren't alone in our loneliness; to second Bill Knott's opinion that a portrait of Marcheta Casati would look beautiful even if hung improbably and inappropriately upon a man's forehead; to write upon my own forehead, as Tully wished citizens might, what I think of the republic; to insist that we are all bookmarks in a holy anthology; that though each of us is a nobody, we are together consequential; that those among us of greater consequence never forget the ache in their forearms; that all anger is unjust; that Jesus and Lenny Bruce spoke the same language; that Janis Joplin could out-sing Maria Callas and Buster Keaton out-talk Christopher Lyden; that buffo, not rage, that laughter, not reason, are the only viable means of wresting dignity from the hands of bureaucrats and professionals; that the ready ease with which an academic will

assume someone to be stupid is more repugnant than a barfight; that yodeling at a plate of eggs can satisfy one's curiosity for a better life; that underdogs can be jerks too; and finally to concur loudly, like a car horn with lips, with Henry James when he said that three things in human life are important: being kind, being kind, and being kind.

5. How then can one be kind when engaging in invective, satire, lampoon, and caricature? Satire appears with the life of officials, with the advent of the officious, when it is impossible to argue or to be kind in a straightforward way. If one cannot anymore be overtly kind, the expression of kindness must become a guerilla affair. I'd thought it wise, then, to be mean to the mean, to insult the officials and the officious. The official life, the life of this empire, the life of rules, is a life that does not readily allow the choice to be kind: insurance companies find such choice risky, and corporations find such choice costly. Officiousness is not a thing, but the very action that removes kindness. The purpose of lampoon is, then in part, to show us that the correct thing is often the improper thing. The purpose of satire is, in part, to show that the decorous action is often the dangerous action. In fact, in such an age, in an age of militarism and canned heroism, tragedy is the mere commodification of suffering and the glue of nationalism. A nation does not laugh, it grieves. Yet it is a false grieving; the grief of nationalism is merely a scrim to hide the buttocks of revenge. America does not know how to suffer because it does not know how to endure. And it does not know how to endure because it cannot laugh. We need dung therefore. Like laughter, the anus is innately disruptive. Dung is laughter. The landbridge of laughter is a preposterous isthmus leading to a seldom visited region of purposeful metaphor, a region where cultural and aesthetic politics matter. And, too, the idea that the comic may be at once oppositional in its uses and concordant in its pleasures is something one may touch upon nicely here.

- 5.1. In fact, tragedy demands impropriety. It is important to approach poetry from a standpoint of good cruelty, from a point cruel to what Jed Rasula calls the "Enlightenment claims for rationality as anchorage of identity," to, in other words, anchor identity not in the irrational, but in the butt, in the anus: to anchor it firmly in the anus with the massive rubber hooks of assonance, the buttresses of rhythm, the plug and fundamental rootworks of linebreak and silence—to splatter the "news" of life out of the cone of rhythm, the news which in an earlier age was called, simply, "the poop," or the "straight poop."
- 5.2. What I'm saying is that a time without impropriety is dangerous, and a dearth of impropriety should especially be feared in a time of nationalism and "war," because in such a time, love is improper, for-

givenness is improper, openness, humility, patience, and kindness are improper. Dearth: after 9.11 Ben Stiller cancelled his guest appearance on SNL, the comic strip "Boondocks" was suspended for a while, and the *The New Yorker* declined to run cartoons in its first issue in the aftermath of 9.11. A typical idea about comedy is that it's frivolous escapist cast-off literary chaff, that it does no cultural work and bears no meaning—or at least that's what freshmen in my comedy classes say during the first week of classes.

- 5.3. Please. Propriety resides in our courts, our police, and in our worst poets. The purpose of propriety is to stop revolution and to mobilize for work and for war. Impropiety more now than ever is needed. What is more necessary in a time of military propaganda than the derision of consensus? Even if it is aesthetic consensus? Comedy fights all idealized conceptions of a group, and it certainly fights all idealized uses of emotion (poignancy). Poignancy is after all akin to nostalgia; nostalgia being a form of idealized memory: what we see in the propagandist efforts of America's major media is a turn toward poignancy (stories of 9.11 heroism, grief, loss) and away from comedy, a turn that perfectly parallels this community's efforts to manufacture consent in a time of military mobilization. American sentimentality, after all, is one of the deadliest aesthetics on record. What do I mean by "sentimentality"? Well, for instance, I don't know how many times I've heard, as an American in America, the phrase, "We will put this terrible tragedy behind us." In the days following 9.11, it was said dozens of times by everyone from Colin Powell to Bush Jr. to Governor Pataki of NY State and Mayor Giuliani. But I'd heard it dozens of times over the last few years anyway: when an "honor student" dies in a car wreck, a plane goes down, a bus slams a pole, we hear the words "terrible tragedy" and are encouraged to "put it behind us." "Tragedy" as a concept has been cathected by the most sentimentalizing features of American culture. It's as if it's the only catchword, idea, or event that will allow us to form even the rudest conception of history as a community. As a result, American public displays of emotion are melodramatic, because they are serving a surrogate cultural function: they are not about emotion, but about our inability to comprehend our own brutal history: Tears and sentimentality, in other words, seem to be the only cultural response Americans can muster in response to our own actions. We're essentially, that is to say, babies. On September 17th, 2001, Scott Segal of "All Things Considered" reported on impromptu street memorials in NYC near ground zero. One in particular caught my attention: Segal said it read, "When we weep,

we endure." I think this is interesting insofar as the comic view is exactly the opposite: comedy doesn't cause us to aspire to something lofty, and it doesn't mimic suffering; instead, comedy mimes durable beings engaged, often, in acts of misprision, folly, or emotional, spiritual, and physical destruction. The point of comedic art is that the writer can make us laugh at these things. Comedy, that is to say, does not teach us to suffer; it teaches us to endure. It shows us up as humble and profoundly resilient creatures. And I think that is the role of "de-ranging" poems in such a time: to remind us that we ought not consider our cause noble, just, good and honorable when we cannot help but laugh at butts, violence, vomit, and cussing.

6. But what of reverence? There is some self-congratulatory quality to those poets who speak of reverence and praise, they who say poetry is inherently about praising and who look on poetry with admiration. Reverence is unseemly. It is antithetical to gratitude. Reverence is the hope that we will not have to suffer the discipline of gratitude. Reverence is the corruption of gratitude by greed. And maybe in some cases it is the corruption of gratitude by jealousy, a jealousy that the thing we revere is not the thing we have. Reverence is somehow, I say, akin to jealousy. What's more, there is something downright impractical about reverence toward literature. The idea of great literature is a danger to literature. The "word" is to be used, not revered.
7. There is a republic not too far from here where the wind slaps the laundry on the line but not the hair on the head. Its daily breezes kindly avoid the mussing of bangs, the dislodging of toupees and the dirtying of hats, and there is little dander in the air therefore. What's more, the hamburgers in that nation are purchased a buck a dozen, and its children do not defecate until the age of 12. It is for these reasons a pretty good nation though secured by subtle and malicious means, keeping a sound lock on its borders and a close watch on its citizens. It has been discovered each of its books contains a camera, and when a book is opened, one's mugshot is affixed to the appendix of all previous readers. Reading itself in that republic is considered a species of mutual surveillance and as a result both the books and the readers there are decorous. There is no litigation, no argument, no disputes among the footnotes, and no laughter. But there is a great deal of weeping, of tragedy talk, and a firm love of soldiers. And the solemnity and propriety of its interior is matched without by the nation's bellicosity against its neighboring republics. I suggest we write books without cameras in them. Maybe they'll catch on.

This essay was requested by the editor. Gabriel Gudding will guest edit an issue of *The Spoon River Poetry Review* in 2004.