

The Trial of the Poetaster: A Dialogue

by Layne Walton, ASPE



Antony Waller: Do you remember when I told you about the big to-do at that university a while back?

Wynona Ratell: Baby, there's some fresh to-do at a university every day.

AW: I'm talking about the controversy over the student poet.

WR: Oh, Lord. *Him*. Is he poet laureate now or something?

AW: He's being expelled.

WR: Over some bad poetry?

AW: Well, that's not how I see it. Some of the accounts I follow on Twitter are going on and on about *cancellation* this, *rhetoric as violence* that. The poems apparently had some content that wasn't very PC, and the boy's professors are appalled.

WR: I'm not seeing the grounds for expulsion.

AW: I don't see them, either, and I said as much on Twitter. But you know how that site is. I had to go private.

WR: Uh-oh. Did things get a little heated?

AW: A guy can get called a fascist only so many times.

WR: Those people don't even know what's in the poems, right?

AW: I don't think any details have been released to the press. It all reminds me of a hypothetical situation I once considered developing into a play. Let me see if I can remember it.

WR: *Much Ado About Doggerel*.

AW: That's actually better than what I came up with. *The Trial of the Poetaster*.

WR: Please steal my title, for the love of God.

AW: I love that you're begging me to steal it when you could just as easily give it to me.

WR: I want to be able to sue you for stealing it.

AW: A real-life follow-up to my fiction. *A literary trial unlike any since Oscar Wilde's!*

WR: Sorry to upstage you, Oscar, darling.

AW: Can I tell you the gist of the play? I'd actually love to hear your honest opinion.

WR: Let me dust off my critical powers.

AW: Please tell me if you think parts of it don't make sense. I want it to be very closely reasoned.

WR: It's a play. It's not a mathematical proof.

AW: It's a play about a *trial*. I don't want to be too lofty about it, but literature and literary theory are being cross-examined by two massively analytical lawyers.

WR: *Inherit the Wind that Blows Through Me*.

AW: How are you so good at that?

WR: Not I, not I, my love.

AW: Oh, *duh*. I forgot. Okay, allow me to be a little hoity-toity for a bit.

WR: Dazzle me.

AW: The fictional poet on trial is very much like the soon-to-be-expelled student. The student's crime was to offend some rather neo-Victorian professors—the easiest crime in the world to commit, some might say. The fictional poet—let's call him Howard—is forced to defend himself against a diabolical charge: the Crime of Delayed Echolalia.

WR: The Crime of Delayed Echolalia. More diabolical than the Crime of *Prompt* Echolalia.

AW: By far. The Crime of Prompt Echolalia is no crime at all—not really. We encounter it all the time, and it gratifies us immensely. I say something witty, and, instead of volleying a witticism back, my acquaintance simply repeats what I said with a laugh. Or I introduce a big word into a discussion and listen as it worms casually into my friend's speech. Or—and this actually does verge on a crime, although it might be the most gratifying of all—I tell you something that impresses you as particularly apt or clever, and then I watch as you raise your voice and regale the room with my words . . . only you've omitted the attribution.

WR: Observed that often, have you?

AW: You'd be surprised. But the Crime of Delayed Echolalia is insidious because enough time has passed for some amnesia to set in. The echolalic offender might be cryptomnesiacally duplicating an idea or a phrase heard a while back.

WR: So in this alternate universe where delayed echolalia is a crime, even Nietzsche, Mr. Cryptomnesiac himself, would spend some time in the slammer.

AW: Nietzsche's how I first came across the idea, actually. It's become something of an *idée fixe* for me ever since.

WR: Easy, Hoity-Toity.

AW: There are two directions I could go in. One involves intrigue. Each professor sees in the poem an opportunity to claim a little piece of Howard: *That idea's mine—oh, that's mine!* Et cetera. Now they appear to have a real stake in the verdict.

WR: Sons of guns. I hope you're thinking of a Man-That-Corrupted-Hadleyburg scenario, what with the name Howard and all.

AW: You're a flippin' genius.

WR: That's how we Thousanders do, baby.

AW: Again, Howard must defend a piece of writing that appears to confess to the Crime of Delayed Echolalia. It goes something like this:

*Nature bequeaths a spider
In lieu of faculties.
Tireless she welds the loot
'Twixt interstitial fleas.*

*In March you say,
"All mutes are spies."
Exhumed in June,
A phrase you do not recognize.*

WR: Did you write that?

AW: Yes, of course. I mean, *Howard* wrote it and I committed it to memory.

WR: Your sticky little mind web catches everything.

AW: Exactly. So you can imagine a cunning literature professor looking up from the poem with a scheme in his eyes, unaware that his scheme is part of Howard's scheme.

WR: Aw, what a sweet little cynical view of humanity.

AW: Or maybe just of humanists. Alternatively, you can imagine a credulous professor—maybe an irony-deficient one—reading this poem and remembering Faulkner's advice to read, read, read, because everything you read will be retained in some form and will reappear in your writing. But the professor gets carried away by her speculations. She imagines that she has read the work of some kind of savant, a very peculiar

savant that doesn't actually exist in nature. A savant that is the *embodiment* of Faulkner's idea of the mind of the writer. A savant very much like an android: it reads incessantly, uploading language into its memory, and then combines and recombines and recombines some more all those symbols that it hardly understands.

WR: So we, as your discerning audience, must accept that there's some moronic professor who would miss all kinds of irony, not only in the poem she's read but also in her interpretation.

AW: I studied literature. It's not such a stretch.

WR: Is it more believable than the department of scheming vipers?

AW: Probably.

WR: Okay. So this embarrassment to her profession thinks that Faulkner is describing not the mind of the artist *per se*, but the mind of a would-be artist with savant syndrome who is somehow uniquely qualified to accept and carry out Faulkner's advice. And the professor, in imagining such a literalization of that advice, can't see that she's done something very savant-like herself.

AW: Correct. But, again, you'd be surprised at the naïveté of some literature faculty.

WR: Naïfs and schemers, working side by side with different agendas.

AW: Now that would be a complicated plot. Maybe unmanageable.

WR: Question.

AW: Mhm?

WR: Is Howard a savant?

AW: I can't reveal that.

WR: Fair enough. I have another question.

AW: I probably can't reveal that, either.

WR: No, I need you to answer this one. How is Howard able to confess to a cryptomnesiac duplication?

AW: Perhaps in the same way that Nietzsche could confess to cryptomnesia—and Mark Twain, for that matter. You've read his famous letter to Helen Keller.

WR: I believe I've read everything the man ever wrote. Just to be clear: the professor, or professors, think that the student poet is semi-aware of his echolalia—that the awareness is repressed in a Freudian sense and, also in a Freudian sense, coming out in the poetry.

AW: Sure.

WR: I don't buy it. One of the senior faculty members—the department's crusty old Shakespearean—has spoken up by now to say that the poem is probably pure invention. "A bit of knavery, that's all!"

AW: The naïfs think that a savant would be too simple to trick them. The schemers either try to exploit what they see to be genuine simplicity *or* they see the trick and attempt to devise a better trick.

WR: I don't see how either group could forge ahead if they really have a handle on the logic of the poem. Isn't it kind of like that paradox where the person tells you, "Everything I say is a lie"?

AW: Yes, exactly. "Everything I say is an echo." So that statement is an echo. Who said it to the speaker? Another speaker. Who said it to that speaker? Another speaker. And on and on. And that will be the meat of the defense attorney's case.

WR: That a literal interpretation of the poem would open up an eternal regression.

AW: And not just any eternal regression, but an eternal regression in which *every English speaker is implicated in the Crime of Delayed Echolalia*.

WR: To a point. The language of the poem has a quaintness that might make it seem ancient to today's readers, but if you go back far enough, the language will become too modern and then, eventually, completely unintelligible.

AW: No one in the audience is going to think about it that rigorously.

WR: Oh, I'm sorry. I thought you wanted the play to be "closely reasoned."

AW: No, I do. Your objection is sound, but I think it's a little beside the point. This one poet is on trial. Can you so overcomplicate the case against him that you effectively exonerate him?

WR: So let's say that this powerful little poem enmeshes all living English speakers in its web. That's what your defense attorney is claiming, right?

AW: Basically.

WR: My cousins in West Virginia don't even know what "interstitial" means.

AW: They don't have to know what it means. They only have to echo the word after hearing the poem from another person.

WR: Got it. And while all of this implicating is going on, the French, let's say, are watching the international news and wondering how this trial turned into *The World vs. English speakers*.

AW: That's an interesting wrinkle, actually. Even an English-speaking judge and jury would be implicated. So let's say you appoint a monolingual French speaker to preside over the

case, and then you get monolingual French speakers to sit in the jury box. Who's going to translate for them? Any English-to-French translator would be on trial.

WR: This is too ludicrous.

AW: The misreading is ludicrous! Taking the misreading to its logical conclusion creates a farce—but a farce with neat things to teach audiences about theories of reading, memory, literary influence, authorship, and so on.

WR: I suppose. The naïfs, taking the attorney's logic to heart, are blindsided by this revelation of their own echolalia. Would the schemers be blindsided?

AW: Maybe. The naïfs crack because they start introspecting and realize that they are mere cryptomnesiacs with a highly developed amnesic mechanism—unlike the savant's, which is rather poorly developed. The schemers would maybe have anticipated the defense attorney's argument, or they might dismiss it as sophistry and pursue their suit with even more aggression now that the attorney has slandered them as unwitting echolalics.

WR: I'm confused again. Is the literal reading fallacious or is it supposed to lead to some deep philosophical truth that the schemers are too stubborn to see?

AW: The literal reading does not logically prove that the poet should be penalized for committing the Crime of Delayed Echolalia. But during the course of the trial, as I said, theories about memory and literary influence—even thinking itself—are unpacked.

WR: This is all a bit complicated for a play, don't you think? Work it out in a philosophical tract and publish it in *Telicom*.

AW: But I like plays.

WR: Write your tract and read some plays on the side.

AW: I want to write a play.

WR: Well, simplify this one, please. Here: The defense attorney stands up and says, "Come on, you fools. Don't you see that this whole trial depends on a ludicrous misreading?"

AW: He actually has several defensive moves to make. First, he addresses the logical problem at the center of the poem. If you accept what the poem says as a true admission, he contends, then you must accept that the poem itself is a duplication—because if you think that the admission is being made in an original work of art, then you have to accept that the admission is being made ironically.

WR: But if there's a sophisticated truth at the end of this defense—maybe one that the defense attorney isn't chasing—then the ironic admission of delayed echolalia would, itself—if only Howard could dig down far enough into his memory—prove to be just another echo.

AW: An echo *with a difference*, which is permissible under the laws of art.

WR: Hold on. Is this conversation just a sequence of echoes?

AW: You can't think that way or you won't be able to think at all.

WR: Oh, God. Am I *savant*?

AW: No. Focus.

WR: That's the epiphany or false epiphany that you think the naïfs are going to have.

AW: Yeah, I guess.

WR: Real epiphany or false epiphany?

AW: I don't know yet. You can almost see, though, why the professors' minds kept insisting on the least sophisticated interpretation of the poem.

WR: Can I? You have too much faith in me.

AW: Oh, stop. Think about it.

WR: If they're schemers, they're devoted to the misreading because they like the glamorous *victimhood* of having their utterances stolen from them. If they're naïve—

AW: Go on. You nailed it with the schemers.

WR: If they're naïve, then of course their reading is naïve because they're incapable of sophistication.

AW: The persuasiveness of the misreading is *self-fortifying*. Because if you assume that the admission is true, and then you imagine that "Nature Bequeaths a Spider" is an example of delayed echolalia, and, consequently, that Howard is some kind of savant, then you would have to rule out the possibility that there's even a modicum of irony in the poem.

WR: The prosecutor could make a nice case there.

AW: Oh, he does. What are you thinking, though?

WR: I'm not going to give you material for your little mind web.

AW: I already know what the prosecutor's case is.

WR: Maybe you do, maybe you don't. If you don't, you could just echo what I say. And then I'd have to go to the police.

AW: I'm going to write the gist of the prosecutor's case in a note on my phone. After

you say what you think the prosecutor's case should be, I'll show you what I've written.

WR: Do we know each other? I'm not being serious!

AW: I thought maybe the theme of the play was making you especially overconfident in the desirability of your ideas.

WR: Excuse you. Many people—including our fellow Thousanders—would be happy to steal my ideas.

AW: Maybe you stole them and you don't remember.

WR: Careful. The room is going to start spinning.

AW: Okay, if you were writing the role of the prosecutor, how would you present his case?

WR: First of all, if I were the prosecutor, I wouldn't bother interrogating the poet because anything he says will just be an echo of his preparation before the trial. The defense attorney has thrown his voice into a little mannequin, in other words.

AW: I like that.

WR: It's mine. You can't have it.

AW: I'm taking it.

WR: 9-1-1 . . .

AW: *Keep going.*

WR: Then I would maybe bring in an expert on savant syndrome to explain some of its features. I'll bring in someone who isn't afraid to recite all the stereotypes, one of which would be the inability to grasp irony—which I've always felt was typical of most people, actually.

AW: Especially academics. Then?

WR: Then I would have the expert give his or her diagnosis of Howard right there in the courtroom—based on observation, the poetry, and so on.

AW: The defense attorney objects. The psychologist can't make a diagnosis in the courtroom, and the poetry can't be used to make a diagnosis, either.

WR: Even if the diagnosis were stricken from the record, the jury would hear it, and it would stick in their minds. That could spell a win for the prosecution.

AW: I hope I can remember all this.

WR: I knew it. You little thief.

AW: Kidding! The defense attorney knows that you're playing dirty and decides to bring in a famous savant to dispel all those dangerous stereotypes. A prodigious savant with a lot to say about the themes of the trial.

WR: Who?

AW: Harold Bloom.

WR: He's not a savant!

AW: The hell he isn't!

WR: Regardless, the man is *dead*.

AW: Did you forget that you're not watching an actual court case? I know he's dead. I'll either bring in an actor to play him—

WR: Who?

AW: I don't know. Me?

WR: Eh. You'll bring in someone other than you to play him—

AW: *I'm* going to play him and—

WR: Zombie Harold or Ghost Harold?

AW: Wait, here's what I'll do: I'll bring in someone to play a medium who will channel Harold.

WR: Antony, sweetie, I just grabbed my bag and walked out of the theater. A *medium*? Has that been done before?

AW: In a play? I don't know. Has it?

WR: I can't remember. Must be my amnesia.

AW: If so, I'll use the zombie.

WR: Now, see, all this time I thought your drama was grounded in a smidge of reality.

AW: Allow me this one extravagance.

WR: You've gone way beyond farce, now.

AW: But the audience has been slowly conditioned to accept whatever I put on the stage. At this point, they might even be willing to accept this new witness as inevitable.

WR: If you say so. Here comes Madame Sosostriis, floating in on a giant Tarot card—or are you going with the zombie?

AW: The medium—her name is, I don't know, Wiggy Dingdong—

WR: You can't call her that.

AW: Why?

WR: Because it poisons the well. The audience will think that *the play* doesn't take her seriously, so they won't.

AW: Okay, an ordinary name then. *Martha*. She sits in the witness box and awaits instruction from the defense attorney. He tells her to go away—mentally, that is—and to bring

Harold Bloom into the courtroom. Her eyes roll back and her mouth opens wide and Harold's voice comes out. Apparently, while in psychic transit, Martha explained to Harold that his expertise on literary influence and the canon was needed in a high-profile court case involving the Crime of Delayed Echolalia.

WR: Why not just bring in a Bloom scholar?

AW: There are no Bloom scholars.

WR: Continue.

AW: Harold asks to hear the offending poem, and after the defense attorney recites it, Harold says, "Rather bad." He then asks why the poem has caused such a fuss. When the defense attorney explains that a department of English professors took issue with the poem's admission of a crime, Harold cuts him off and begins expounding the most learned, soul-stirring defense that our young poet could possibly hope for.

WR: And your audience will be nodding along and throwing up praise hands during this séance.

AW: The audience will be learning too much to care about all the supernatural goings-on. Harold declares that if the English professors in question had read more Harold Bloom and less French theory, they wouldn't have been confused by the poetaster's work at all. He then chides them for committing the undergraduate sin of reading a poem as though it were autobiographical—the same interpretive blunder that those very professors warn their undergraduates against when they begin their little unit on, for example, Shakespeare's sonnet sequence.

WR: I remember my English professor *insisting* that Shakespeare was bisexual.

AW: Oh, mine too. Shakespeare has been claimed by bisexuals as one of their own because no one knows how to read the sequence. Anyway,

Harold has been talking so much that Martha's mouth is drooling.

WR: What the hell?

AW: She's drooling like an idiot. And Harold has moved on to Borges's Pierre Menard and Funes. He's mentioned the fact that every work of literature is an echo of prior works of literature going all the way back to Homer. "This trial, my dears," he says to the court, "is based on a weak misreading of a weak summary of my life's work." Then Martha shuts her mouth and unrolls her eyes and the defense attorney hands her a towel.

WR: Where did he get the towel?

AW: From the prop department. So that's what I have, so far. Bloom is the star witness, and his defense clinches—in the audience's mind, at least—the poet's exoneration. But I'm not sure if I want the poet to be found innocent or guilty. And if the professors have devised a scheme, I don't know if I want it to come to light. Maybe I want to be a little wicked. I just feel like a guilty verdict would outrage the audience more, you know? They'll leave the theater fuming, like an actual injustice has been committed. Then, after some impassioned word of mouth, the show will become a blockbuster.

WR: The whole thing's a little lopsided, though. You've shown a lot of favoritism to the poet and to his defense. Could be a design flaw.

AW: I'll try to beef up the prosecution's case a little.

WR: You mean *I'll* beef it up.

AW: I really was kidding earlier.

WR: Uh-huh. So Bloom's cameo from beyond the grave is an attempt to make literary theory admissible as evidence in a court of law.

AW: In a literary case like this, I think it should be. I mentioned the laws of art earlier. They're more explicable using literary theory than legal theory.

WR: I think you expect your audience to underestimate English professors. They're all going to have lovely memories of their English professors, and, I promise you, they'll bristle at the whole scenario. Someone is going to leave the theater saying to herself, "I just know Dr. So-and-So would never think, at one and the same time, that a poem is autobiographical—and, therefore, damning—and also an echo—and, therefore, not autobiographical."

AW: That does need to be addressed.

WR: I want to make sure you've considered everything.

AW: You know I appreciate it. And I would appreciate one more thing. I asked you earlier for a brutal, no-holds-barred, classic Wynona reaction.

WR: I remember.

AW: Would you pay money to see this play?

WR: Honestly?

AW: I have tough skin. Just say it.

WR: I remember reading something in the *New Yorker* a while ago about Obama's poetry from his Occidental days. The journalist who wrote the piece actually showed the poems to Harold Bloom and got his reaction to them. I think I'll echo what Bloom said, but with a difference: "My dear, you do not have a future as a man of the theater." Ω

“Life is never fair,
and perhaps
it is a good thing
for most of us
that it is not.”
—Oscar Wilde