Sentimental Authority

America's National Poets Laureate

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"The idea of democracy corresponds to the absence of leadership," Hans Kelsen writes in his *Essence and Value of Democracy* (87). "Yet," he concedes, "the democratic freedom ideal, the absence of rule and, hence, of leadership, cannot be realized even approximately; social reality *is* rule and leadership" (87–8). The U.S., it seems, did not want to settle for this social reality and therefore created an office that is more in accordance with the idea of democracy, a high position analogous to the presidency but also somewhat different. Signifying similarity and difference, the acronyms POTUS and PLOTUS highlight that these effulgent posts mutually add luster to each other: the qualities of leadership and authority, respectively. POTUS, the President of the United States, is a powerful leader; PLOTUS, the Poet Laureate of the United States, is a respected authority partly conceptualized after America's leader. Following Hannah Arendt, one could say that leadership rules on the basis of power, whereas authority metaphorically rules on the basis of recognition. "When we say of somebody that he is 'in power,'" Arendt writes in her seminal text *On Violence*, "we actually refer to his being empowered by a certain number of people to act in their name. The moment the group, from which the power originated to begin with (*potestas in populo*, without a people or group there is no power), disappears, 'his power' also vanishes" (1969, 44). A leader leads in the name of his people and depends on their existence; an authority does not necessarily act in the name of a group but depends on people's recognition. "To remain in authority," Arendt says, "requires respect for the person or the office. The greatest enemy of authority, therefore, is contempt, and the surest way to undermine it is laughter" (45). In reality, there are no clear-cut distinctions between the two, Arendt admits: "Thus institutionalized power in organized communities often appears in the guise of authority, demanding instant, unquestioning recognition; no so-

ciety could function without it" (46). In this blurry societal sphere, we also find America's national poets laureate, who are authorities rather than leaders.

In this contribution, I am not going to say much about U.S. poets laureate on subnational levels, such as U.S. state, county, or civic poets laureate. I will focus on the positions National Youth Poet Laureate and Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry, and I will, from an inter-American perspective, zoom in on two poets who held these positions, two firsts: Amanda Gorman, who was named the first National Youth Poet Laureate in 2017, and Juan Felipe Herrera, the first Latinx PLOTUS, who served two terms from 2015 to 2017. Further, I will question whether poet laureate positions were a desideratum when the first of these national offices was established in the U.S. in the first half of the 20th century, and I will argue that the American attempt to dignify poetry with a national office devalues the office of the poet. Finally, I will take an asentimental but not entirely unpassionate look at the democratic system of literature and its power in general.

The U.S. poet laureate positions run on emotion. Clearly, they were not primarily established for practical but for sentimental reasons: They can be seen as exaggerated manifestations of prevalent sentiments, of opinions about or feelings toward poetry, feelings of sadness and nostalgia in the 20th and 21st centuries in America, sadness about the alleged unimportance of poets and poetry, and nostalgia for a time when "everyone" purportedly "recognized the value of poetry," when poets supposedly mattered and were still revered as eminent public voices (Lipking 1050). Charging poetry with emotion, the U.S. poet laureateships are founded on, and inflate, sentimental feelings and ideas about tradition, usefulness, and authority.

Located in the hybrid realm where the political arena overlaps the poetic field, the positions are rooted in nostalgic internationalism, Anglo-American national conservatism (the belief in national independence and national institutions), as well as vague notions of the Great American Empire. Derived from the Latin *poeta laureatus*, but not only etymologically linked to the Roman Empire, the U.S. poet laureateships recover, mildly modernize, preserve, and continue traditions that go back to ancient Greece and Rome, to Francesco Petrarca, who was crowned poet laureate in 1342, and to the royal office of poet laureate in England, which dates from the appointment of John Dryden in 1668. In the U.S., we learn in the History-of-the-Position section of the website of the Library of Congress, whose Librarian annually appoints the Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry, the position of PLOTUS has existed under two sepa-

rate honorific titles: from 1937 to 1986 as "Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress," and from 1986 to present as "Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry."

In the U.K., the post of official poet sentimentalizes poets and poetry to a much lesser degree than the American positions do. The Poet Laureate of the United Kingdom is one of Her/His Majesty's craftspeople, approved by the Queen or the King acting on the advice of Her/His Majesty's Government. Some of these craftsmen are manufacturers of waterproof and protective clothing, like Barbour, some are bootmakers, such as John Lobb, and others, like Simon Armitage, are makers of poems, of poems with a Royal Warrant, so to speak. In the U.K., the poet laureate is—and I will get back to this distinction below—*artifex*, not, as the poet laureate in the U.S., *auctor*. In the U.K., poet laureate is a more understated, less pretentious position than in the United States. The incumbent is "simply" a purveyor of poetic goods, a wordsmith by the grace of Her/His Majesty, not the Queen or King of Poetry, whereas in the U.S., poet laureate is a more modern but also more pompous job, trying to seem more important than it really is: Romanticized and glorified as PLOTUS, the U.S. poet laureate is the Poetry President of America. Recently, things have changed a bit. The Library of Congress might have become aware of the pomposity and no longer foregrounds the POTUS/PLOTUS analogy, but the acronym is still implied and continues to be meaningful. PLOTUS, the unofficial abbreviation for Poet Laureate of the United States, is analogous to POTUS, but other than the President of the United States, the U.S. poet laureate is not really in a powerful position of authority. Poets laureate might be considered leading authorities in the field of literature, but they are not leaders, they are not given real authority over anything or anyone, they do not have the authority of a censor, for example, or the authority to enforce rules. They have to exercise their authority in other ways. They also exercise, I argue, a different kind of authority, which could be called sentimental authority. Endowed with this special power, these poets are sometimes patronizingly brought together with more powerful people. Amanda Gorman, for example, "introduced secretary Hillary Clinton at the 2017 Global Leadership Awards, was celebrated by First Lady Michelle Obama at the White House, and performed at the Library of Congress with U.S. Poet Laureate Tracy K. Smith" (Urban Word). But compared to powerful positions in national politics or the country's economy, compared with POTUS or with CEOs of the giant tech companies, for example, American poets laureate are powerless dwarfs.

Virtually powerless, but recognized as the experts and public intellectuals that they are, poets laureate are also expected to serve a useful function

and to contribute something to society. The National Youth Poet Laureate Program—an initiative of Urban Word, a youth literary arts organization collaborating with local arts and literary organizations, Arts Councils, and library systems—celebrates "youth poets who are committed to" more than just poetry (Urban Word). On the Urban Word website we read that "judges for the annual competition follow a rubric to guide their selection of a National Youth Poet Laureate" that not only "exemplifies literary excellence," but "civic engagement, and social impact, demonstrated by a poetry portfolio, a civic engagement brag sheet where finalists explain the nature and impact of their civic slash community work, and two short essays." So "[a]ll of the poets" are "judged on their artistic excellence, as well as their commitment to civic engagement, youth leadership and social impact" (Urban Word). In April 2017, when "nineteen-year-old Amanda Gorman of Los Angeles was named" the "country's inaugural National Youth Poet Laureate," she was not only presented as a poet, but as a speaker and community leader, who "worked with the LA commission on Human Relations to develop youth programs" and to "conduct a county-wide library tour" (Urban Word). Gorman is also "the founder and executive director of the organization One Pen One Page, which promotes literacy among youth through creative writing programming, an online magazine, and advocacy initiatives" (Urban Word).

Today, we can only imagine what the 19th-century American aestheticist, poet-critic, and writer of prose fiction Edgar Allan Poe would have said about all this: "heresy of *The Didactic*," I think, would not have been his surliest response and most unfavorable or disparaging comment (Poe 75). Poet Walt Whitman, however, probably would have approved and would have considered all that an affirmation of his belief that poets are of use. Whitman charged usefulness with emotion, for example in his extremely enthusiastic poem "I Hear America Singing," which was first published, as No. 20 of "Chants Democratic," in the 1860-edition of *Leaves of Grass*. In a historical moment of crisis, when the War Between the States was imminent, Whitman—an impassioned and radiant poet of excitement, to whom flat and blunted affect, *Cool Conduct* or the *Culture of Distance* in Lethen's sense, were alien—strengthened the Union through the image of workmen and workwomen building America and so being of use. By emphasizing usefulness, Whitman demonstrated that he was a poet in the Platonic tradition, which is very strong in the U.S. Following its common thread, usefulness, one can trace it from early American writing to contemporary American literature, from the 18th to the 21st century, as the following four examples, one per century, show. In 1782, in his pamphlet "Infor-

mation to Those Who Would Remove to America," Benjamin Franklin counts "strangers, possessing talents in the belles-lettres, fine arts, etc." as "improper persons" and discourages them from trying to become citizens of the new republic by telling them that almost no one there needed or could pay for their products: "paintings, statues, architecture, and the other works of art, that are more curious than useful" (456–7). Walt Whitman, as if he had to justify himself to Franklin, claims in his 1855-preface to *Leaves of Grass* that poets "are of use" (Whitman 2005, 19). With his 1965-poem "Black Art," LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka implicitly counters Franklin and supports his great 19th-century precursor, Walt Whitman, in his view that poets and poems "are useful" (116). Alluding to the 19th-century American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson with her essay "The American Scholar Now," Marilynne Robinson, in 2018, succinctly describes the old problem with the Platonic tradition: "The arts have been under attack since Plato at least, on the grounds that they had no useful role in society" (92–3). The tremendous force of this utilitarian ideology can be experienced in Rebecca Solnit's book about *Orwell's Roses*, where she defends the arts against this attack but succumbs to the Platonic pull herself when she foregrounds the compensatory function of art (cf. 91ff). The U.S. poet laureate positions are also deeply rooted in the Platonic tradition. They participate in and continue the dominant tradition of American poetry: the Emersonian-Whitmanian one, which is in the tradition of *poésie engagée*. Think of the National Youth Poet Laureate Program's focus on engagement, for example! As follow-ups to Whitman and his romanticized depiction of usefulness, the U.S. poets laureate glorify usefulness. The American laureate positions are to uphold Whitman's Platonic belief that the poet is of use. "As the nation's official poet," we read on the Library of Congress website, "the Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress seeks to raise the national consciousness to a greater appreciation of the reading and writing of poetry." What we can see here is that the position of poet laureate may push poets "toward the 'practical,' narrowly conceived: the instrumental, the utilitarian" (Deresiewicz 2022, 87), but it seems to do so for poetry's sake.

The U.S. poet laureateship is a paradoxical institution: It makes, to a certain extent, poetry and the poet heteronomous again while trying to conserve the modern idea of artistic autonomy, an idea recently summarized quite well by William Deresiewicz:

> art as an autonomous realm of meaning making, not subordinate to the old powers of church and king or the new powers of politics and the market, be-

> holden to no authority, no ideology, and no master. I mean the notion that the artist's job is not to entertain the audience or flatter its beliefs, not to praise the Lord, the group, or the sports drink, but to speak a new truth. (Deresiewicz 2020, 10)

The strong feeling—originated in Europe at the end of the 18th century, arguably on the wane now but still prevalent—that modern art and artists are supposed to be free is not to be hurt by the U.S. poet laureate. As far as this sentiment is concerned, the American public is not supposed to suffer any serious harm. America is supposed to have an affective experience of sympathy and patriotism when it comes to its national poet, and the poet laureate should not suffer major restrictions or have to work under constraint. Therefore, the U.S. poet laureateship affirms the traditional American ideals of independence and freedom.

This is arguably the major reason why the work of poets laureate in the U.S. is less service-, event-, and occasion-oriented than that of the U.K. poet laureate, for example, which, as a position or office, is not as modern as the one in America. In the U.K., it is not unusual that the poet laureate produces occasional poems, as Simon Armitage did on September 13, 2022, when he published a poem marking the death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. In the U.S., however, occasional poems by an incumbent or by a former poet laureate, such as Amanda Gorman's inaugural poem, are the exception rather than the rule; in fact, Amanda Gorman, whose presence and performance graced the inauguration of Joe Biden as the 46th president, was only the second former national poet laureate ever to assume the role of inaugural poet. The first one, Robert Frost, was also former, not incumbent poet laureate when he acted as John F. Kennedy's inaugural poet on January 20, 1961, exactly 60 years before Gorman. Only two former national poets laureate have ever been inaugural poets, and no incumbent U.S. poet laureate has ever performed this role, neither Richard Eberhart, Mona Van Duyn, Robert Hass, Kay Ryan, Natasha Trethewey, Joy Harjo, nor Meera Dasgupta, to name only those who were in office when the inaugural poems were performed by other poets. The fact that there have only been six inaugural poets (Robert Frost, Maya Angelou, Miller Williams, Elizabeth Alexander, Richard Franco, Amanda Gorman) for four Democratic Presidents (Kennedy, Clinton, Obama, Biden) in all of U.S. history, and that all of them, except Frost, performed their "useful" function in the last 30 years, shows us that the country does not really have a long-standing, strong tradition of this type of occasional poem, which works, by

the way, primarily because of its particular occasion; especially so on January 20, 2021, when we saw, heard, and listened to Amanda Gorman, a veritable *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which perfectly fit, with its wonderful synthesis of artistic and non-artistic features, the occasion on that particular day in U.S. history, after the January 6 Capitol riot and after Trump had lost the presidential election to Biden. The fact remains that the U.S. poet laureate's duties do not include writing occasional poems.

On its website, the Library of Congress emphasizes that it "keeps to a minimum the specific duties of the poet laureate in order to afford incumbents maximum freedom to work on their own projects while at the Library." In the History-of-the-Position section we read that "[t]he original duties of the consultant in poetry differed greatly from the current duties of the poet laureate. […] Over the years, the position gradually placed less emphasis on developing the Library's collections and more on organizing local poetry readings, lectures, conferences, and outreach programs. The poet laureate," it says on the website, "gives an annual lecture and reading of his or her poetry at the Library of Congress." When it mentions that "[e]ach poet laureate brings a different emphasis to the position," the Library of Congress highlights individuality without encouraging deviancy.

It is not completely unthinkable but highly unlikely that a chosen national poet, such as the Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry or the National Youth Poet Laureate, will ever be a total outsider, a completely disturbing and disquieting poet, a real *poète maudit*, an ostracized poet, one of those who are always at odds or in trouble with Power and Society, as Alfred de Vigny's character Stello describes it: "of the three forms of Power, the first is afraid of us, the second scorns us as useless, the third one hates us and tries to pull us down […]. Are we, then, the eternal Pariahs of society?" (193) American poets laureate are meant to be different. They are supposed to be of use to the U.S. It is expected that they are good poets for the common good. They should definitely *not* do more harm than good, as Amiri Baraka did in 2002, when he attacked America from the subnational position of Poet Laureate of New Jersey, a post abolished in 2003 because of Baraka, who evinced and created destructive emotions, and, of course, because of his incendiary 9/11 poem that supposedly reeks of harmfulness, badness, ugliness, and falsehood. There is probably an unwritten rule in official verse culture that authors of such poems must never become U.S. poet laureate. The honorary title of national poet laureate implicitly commits the incumbent to the three "supreme kinds of value," to beauty, truth, and good (Tatarkiewicz 1), especially the public good, thereby eclipsing the fact that art

can also be, or is essentially, amoral. The position of poet laureate reductively glorifies a specific image and social role of the poet. The U.S. poet laureate is an amalgam of artist and sage, of civil servant and civil seer, a citizen-prophet, "a person gifted with profound moral insight and exceptional powers of expression," maybe even someone "who speaks by divine inspiration" (*American Heritage Dictionary*, "prophet").

A national poet laureateship is arguably the highest honor official American Verse Culture can bestow upon an individual poet, who is given sentimental authority over nothing in particular, in nostalgic remembrance of the archetypal lauded poet of an idealized past, when poets supposedly still mattered. U.S. poets laureate are incumbent beacons in "sad" modern times of poetry's alleged unimportance and disappreciation. They might even be considered priceless, not least because of their sentimental value, but also because they support what John Agresto recently called "the two most important parts of American life—the growth of ourselves as individuals and the betterment of our country" (xiii). Both parts were charmingly played by Juan Felipe Herrera.

In 2015, the bilingual Latino poet, performance artist, and activist became the first Latinx PLOTUS. The appointment of Juan Felipe Herrera as Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry turned this post into a truly transnational position that subverted narrow chauvinistic notions of the U.S. and reflected the "plural cultural-political matrix" of the Americas (Feinsod 9). Herrera—the son of migrant Mexican farmworkers, born in Fowler, California, educated at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), Stanford University, and the University of Iowa Writer's Workshop—was named California's poet laureate in 2012 and then served as U.S. poet laureate. Herrera rose from subnational to national authority, from a respected authority rooted in a particular minority verse culture to the representative authority of official American verse culture.

In 2018, in a patriotic children's book titled after its refrain, *Imagine*, Herrera depicts his ascending career path—from humble nonnational origins to a high national position of authority—as an American success story of upward mobility, as a hopeful tale of achievement meant to inspire kids, a story that climaxes with the following passage, which unsurprisingly comes toward the end of the unpaginated picture book:

> If I stood up
> wearing a robe
> in front of my familia and many more
> on the high steps

> of the Library of Congress
> in Washington, D.C., and
> read out loud and signed
> my poetry book
> like this —
> Poet Laureate of the United States of America

The office of official U.S. poet has obviously shaped Herrera, but apparently without obliterating his moderately insurgent feelings and counterdiscursive habitus: Deliberately targeting or unintentionally undermining the political discourse of the 2018-POTUS, he integrated the Spanish word "familia" into the English text so that it almost naturally fits in with its environment, like other Spanish-American elements naturally fit into the U.S., the text subtly implies. Right next to this text in verse, on the facing page, one of Lauren Castillo's less realistic than idealizing illustrations shows Juan Felipe Herrera in an elevated position, surrounded by a halo of light, dressed in a robe, standing behind a lectern, beside the U.S. flag, addressing an audience with his hands raised like a priest in a place of worship. The young reader then turns the page and is uplifted by the book's final words: "imagine what you could do" (Herrera 2018).

What we get here is the poet as authorized presenter and useful speaker of particular myths, ideologies, and discourses that have achieved the status of official lies, which is a negative—Greek, or Platonic—aspect of authority. In his book *The Hatred of Literature*, William Marx reminds us that not all poets were considered harmful to Plato's republic:

> Socrates admits that a certain kind of poetry is useful: […] one authorized by the state […]. What is at issue here is strictly power and authority: the lies of poetry are dangerous not because every lie is dangerous, but because every lie is dangerous when it is not told by the state. […] Significantly, it is not poetry itself that is condemned, but the poets, who are criticized for a lack of authority, in the strongest sense of the term: they are not authorized to lie […]. (Marx 33)

With the ex-PLOTUS's authority to "lie" Herrera presents his motivational narrative in *Imagine*, this realization-of-the-American-Dream story, as only a humble example for almost unimaginable possibilities. His career development from simple farmhand to supreme poet reminds us of Walt Whitman, whom Harold Bloom called "our national poet" (5). The foregrounding of

Herrera's humble background evokes Whitman's preface to the 1855-edition of *Leaves of Grass*, where the author romantically says that "the genius of the United States is […] always most in the common people" (Whitman 2005, 6). Whitman's U.S. poet much less resembles a monotheistic ruler than one of the Roman gods, who, as Hannah Arendt wrote in her essay on authority, "have authority among, rather than power over, men" (2006, 123). Whitman had what Hannah Arendt called the "awareness that the source of authority transcends power and those who are in power," and he established the American poet as the nation's most important authority (141).

In his first term as U.S. poet laureate, Juan Felipe Herrera used his authority to create "*La Casa de Colores* […], a […] project he described as 'a house for all voices,'" the Library of Congress's website tells us in its Poet-Laureate-Projects section. One of the features of Herrera's inclusion-oriented project was "La Familia (The Family)." In "La Familia," he evinced a patriarchal authority, invited guests to his online-house, and encouraged them to write poems about specific topics. Here, Herrera openly exercised his authority, "authority" in the sense of Hannah Arendt. I think that Arendt's lucid explanations perfectly capture the social situation of Herrera's poet laureate project. Here is Arendt:

> Since authority always demands obedience, it is commonly mistaken for some form of power or violence. Yet authority precludes the use of external means of coercion; where force is used, authority itself has failed. Authority, on the other hand, is incompatible with persuasion, which presupposes equality and works through a process of argumentation. Where arguments are used, authority is left in abeyance. Against the egalitarian order of persuasion stands the authoritarian order, which is always hierarchical. If authority is to be defined at all, then, it must be in contradistinction to both coercion by force and persuasion through arguments. (92–3) […] Authority implies an obedience in which men retain their freedom […]. (Arendt 2006, 105)

The contributors to Herrera's project were neither coerced nor persuaded to participate. They were free to follow his commands with the obedience that the authority of the U.S. poet laureate demanded. The project initiated by the authority is more important than the product crafted by the contributors. The "author," as Hannah Arendt defines the word in the Roman sense, is in the foreground. "In order to understand more concretely what it meant to be in authority," Arendt writes,

> it may be useful to notice that the word *auctores* can be used as the very opposite of the *artifices*, the actual builders and makers, and this is precisely when the word *auctor* signifies the same thing as our "author." […] The author in this case is not the builder but the one who inspired the whole enterprise and whose spirit, therefore, much more than the spirit of the actual builder, is represented in the building itself. In distinction to the *artifex*, "who only made it, he is the actual 'author' of the building, namely its founder; with it he has become an 'augmenter' of the city. (122) […] It is in this context that word and concept of authority originally appeared. The word *auctoritas* derives from the verb *augere*, 'augment,' and what authority or those in authority constantly augment is the foundation. (121)

The 21st poet laureate of the United States of America was the "author"—*auctor*, "the one who inspired the whole enterprise," not *artifex*—of the building he founded in 2015 and named *La Casa de Colores* (122); "with it he" (122)—who "stood up," as he says in his children's book *Imagine*, "on the high steps / of the Library of Congress / in Washington, D.C." (Herrera 2018)—"has become an 'augmenter' of the city," the capital that synecdochically stands for the nation and the American Empire (Arendt 2006, 122); "with it he" has also become an augmenter by placing the United States within the wider context of the hemisphere and beyond (122); and with his "house for all voices," he has also asserted his authority by augmenting the Whitmanian foundation (Library of Congress, n.d.). Herrera's initiative, this "house," is a truly Whitmanian project in the line of tradition of the foundational American poet's preface to *Leaves of Grass* and his poem "I Hear America Singing." In both Whitman's poem and Herrera's project, the authority figure of the author is primarily a perceiver of colorful poetic utterance by the American people. But the speaker of Whitman's "I Hear America Singing" only talks about "the varied carols I hear" and lists their singers (Whitman 2002, 12), whereas Herrera's project really presents their "songs." Herrera's "La Familia" looks like the realization of a project for which he might have drawn inspiration from Walt Whitman's foundational American *Naissance* poem.

Poet laureate in the U.S. is a *Re-Naissance* post, based on the sentimental myth of a Golden Age and on a significant revival of ancient Greece and Rome. The sentimental authority of the U.S. poet laureate has, one could say, a Roman (up)side and a Greek (down)side. Advocates of literary autonomy and a free Republic of Letters are probably prone to subscribe to Hannah Arendt, who not only writes that "the concept of authority […] is exclusively Roman," but also

adds: "at least in its positive aspect" (2006, 106). One may consider the Roman kind of authority we detect in the position of the poet laureate of the United States not only as an unproblematic but even as a positive feature, whereas one might see the Greek features—poetry and poets are supposed to be useful, the authorized poet in the republic has to be a state poet—as less positive and more problematic. Both sides were already there in the depiction of the poet by the foundational U.S.-American writer Walt Whitman, who founded, or at least cofounded, the democratic tradition of poetry in the U.S., a tradition that still dominates contemporary American verse. As I showed above, authority does not only have a dark, Greek side but also a light, Roman side. Some, myself included, certainly think that the Greek side predominates here and that the Roman merits do not outweigh the Greek disadvantages. Others might assess the combination of factors differently or make a considered judgment about the two sides without seeing any demerits at all.

In conclusion, I strike a less ambivalent and decidedly more negative note by looking at America's national poets laureate from two different aspects, democracy and power, with reference to the social system of literature in general. It is interesting to see that there is a noticeably large number of democratic countries without a poet laureate position, in fact most of them do not have such a position. This is not particularly astonishing, because a non-elected pseudopresidential office holder is an anomaly in democratic nations. The "adult" U.S. poet laureate is an anachronism in this day and age. With its sentimental, nostalgic value, the office of U.S. poet laureate is a relic of the non-democratic past that does not fit into a democracy and that does not really have a rightful place in the democratic institution of literature either, an institution ruled by what Jacques Derrida called *tout dire*, the principle that everything and anything can be said, "with a sense of exhausting a totality" and "without constraints on what one may say," an institution without the need for pseudopresidents or pseudopresidential power (36). America's national poet laureate offices, youth and "adult," these comparatively unimportant jobs, these positions endowed, at best, with symbolic power, disguise and minimize literature's true power and importance. By trying to make poetry great again, by trying to make poetry matter more now, the national poet laureate sentimentalizes the transnational social system of literature, a system that, in reality, has always been synchronically dominated by its environment, by more powerful social systems in our societies, such as politics and law. Whether sentimentalization leads to a significant increase in poetry's power, importance, and value is debatable and doubtful, though. It is also question-

able, if such an increase via sentimentalization is necessary at all. Because as long as individual texts are not erased, as long as the symbolic systems of literature survive their own time of production as well as subsequent acts of being banned, blacklisted, censored, "ameliorated," etc., and as long as the archive remains intact over time, literature wins anyway, hands down, so to speak. The power and importance of the social system of literature increases with time, which can be demonstrated by referring to the centenary of James Joyce's *Ulysses* in 2022. The legal and socio-political issues that led to a ban on the book, even before it was published in 1922, and the fact that this literary milestone was once suppressed by court order are only of historical relevance today. That "a panel of three judges," "[f]ollowing a complaint by the secretary of the New York Society for the Prevention of Vice,"—Catherine Flynn writes in her introduction to *The Cambridge Centenary Ulysses*—"ruled that the novel was obscene according to the Hicklin test," that it supposedly "had the tendency 'to deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences,'" and that ten years later, in 1932, the official order was "a ban only in name in the United States" are historically interesting pieces of information (4–5), but also just details of yet another case that can be filed away under the pleonastic rubric *Ridiculous Censorship*. Diachronically seen, more than one hundred years later, this classic case of censorship shows us that literature is generally more powerful and important than the social systems of law and politics, which is unintentionally made so opaque by the U.S. poet laureate offices as to be difficult to perceive or understand. The social system of literature does not really need poets laureate, but some nations obviously continue to believe that a poet laureate is more than a nice-to-have and that they serve a useful purpose, which, as far as the U.S. are concerned, cannot be completely dismissed. The office of poet laureate may contribute to the United States' greater glory, but it does not, one could argue, do the same for poetry. Instead of achieving its intended effect, instead of elevating the image of poets and poetry, the office belittles them by forcing the hierarchical structure of other social systems on them, which makes poets look weak, in comparison to real leaders, national political leaders, for example, such as the U.S. president. The offices Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry and National Youth Poet Laureate create delusions of grandeur that blur the real power of poetry: its diachronic power, which is a big asset of literature in general. Synchronically, literature often loses, but diachronically, chances are, it will emerge victorious.

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