

The Powerless Power of Poets: Experimenting with the Self-in-Relation

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“Poems are dangerous,” read the headline of an interview with the American poet and editor Sam Hamill in a German newspaper on February 1, 2003. To a German audience, this was news indeed. We are inclined to agree with Auden that “poetry makes nothing happen,” except, perhaps, under forms of dictatorship where a poem may get you into trouble. How can poetry be dangerous in a democracy? Hamill had begun to collect poems on a website named “poetsagainstthewar.org” protesting the impending war against Iraq. In response, the White House postponed a poetry event to which he had been invited, but as people on both sides of the Atlantic probably expected, neither the poems read nor those not read posed any ‘danger’ to the course of foreign policies.

One may dismiss the phrase as one of the hyperbolic statements poets are apt to make. The poet “can make every word he speaks draw blood,” wrote Whitman in his preface to *Leaves of Grass* (Whitman 8) and a “chance word, upon paper, may destroy the world,” warned William Carlos Williams in *Paterson* (Williams 129). Amidst the bravado one can always hear a certain despair, as though the belief in the power of poetry is necessary to go on writing a few years before or after a great war. The statements are indicators of a political climate where poets feel compelled to emphasize their social significance. In this situation, poetic experiment is apt to be used to envision new ways of interacting with public life. It is therefore worthwhile asking wherein the power, perhaps even the danger of poetry may lie today. One intricate answer could be found two weeks after Hamill’s statement in *The Village Voice*, where Joshua Clover quoted the poet Ann Lauterbach as saying:

Perhaps poets come to the fore at such times because we already live at the margins, we represent a kind of powerless power, and maybe people become interested in this; the idea that persons can devote a life to something that will not bring the usual rewards. . . . This is a kind of identification, especially when people feel they have so little say in the matter.

Lauterbach implies that if “poetry makes nothing happen,” this may be precisely why it is so important: it comes to represent powerlessness as a widespread experience and may thus offer models of identification, perhaps even ways of coping with it – and therein lies its power. In the following remarks, I wish to explore this paradoxical idea in two steps: I want to suggest that a sense of the diminished role of individual agency with regard to public issues is central to the poems in two recent anthologies, *Poets Against the War*, edited by Sam Hamill, and *enough*, edited by Leslie Scalapino and Rick London. When it comes to social and political action, poets as citizens experience themselves as helpless, impotent, and even as victims. This diagnosis is true equally for most of the rather conventional poems in Hamill’s anthology as well as for the more experimental ones in *enough*. In contrast to ‘canonical,’ or ‘mainstream,’ which I understand as sociological terms referring to the institutionalized framework of poetry, ‘conventional’ can be more easily used to identify an older mode of writing or a period style; in the case of many poems in *Poets Against the War*, they echo the style of the protest poems of the 60s, such as for instance those in the anthology *Where is Vietnam?* edited by Walter Lowenfels. I want to demonstrate that this style can be used for an initial diagnosis of the current socio-political climate precisely because the style lacks the power and the means to respond to its pressures adequately. These poems suggest that the use of a conventional style in the treatment of social and political problems is not just vaguely dissatisfying because the style has been used before; it is dissatisfying because the language misses aspects of the current situation and seems inadequate to express our experience of it.

In the second step, I want to introduce some poems which are experimental in that they try to devise new ways of conveying a sense of urgency. In contrast to the styles we associate with the Language poets, these poems are not marked by disruptions of syntax and reference as their experiments are not so much directed at language itself but at the ways in which poetry can make us feel concerned about our relations to others. I will distinguish between two kinds of such experiments: one, touched upon only briefly, creates witty blends of public language to reveal particular constructions of reality such as arise from economics tied to patriotism, for instance, or religion merging with declarations of war. The thrust of these poems is a cognitive one; they imply connections to be uncovered by a discerning reader that could be translated into terms of political diagnosis. The second mode of experiment uses the means of poetry to appeal to kinds of affects that lie before or beneath any form of political association, such as tenderness, care, or a sense of awe. Arguably, the poems by Adrienne Rich and by Juliana Spahr do not really use “another language;” yet, they test out ways in which poetry could express a sense of the self in relation to others and to the world without posing a collective identity – in terms of gender, race, or nationality, for instance – as a starting point.

Here, the contrast with a more conventional attempt can illuminate the challenge this entails.

Conventional Complaints

Hayden Carruth’s “Complaint and Petition” is representative of all those poems in the anthologies that are based on an individual voice projecting itself against the nation. It is a particularly male genre that has a lineage back through Allen Ginsberg and Walt Whitman to Philip Freneau and once captured revolutionary democratic ideas. What is most noticeable in recent texts, however, is a quaintness which conveys the suspicion that the whole performance may no longer be appropriate: “I address you from a remote / margin of your dominion in plain- / style Yankee quatrains because / I don’t know your exalted language / of power” (Carruth 46). These lines evoke the republican idea whereby moral integrity resides in plain citizens who live far away from the center of power – wherever that may be today. Poetry is appropriate to the occasion because it is presumably as far from the language of power as is the poet’s abode. As a marker of powerlessness, the poet suggests, his poem indicates his moral integrity and even superiority over the president. But the many self-conscious speech acts raise increasing doubts about these assumptions: the word “margin” draws attention to the unlikelihood that the poet does not know about the current language of power, the specification of “we, the people” as pre-industrial craftsmen and -women raises the suspicion that the idea of representation may be just as dated as people who produce things with their hands. Even the title seems ill-chosen, since the poem turns out to be not so much a “Complaint and Petition” as an accusation and exhortation:

hide yourself in your own shame,
lest otherwise the evil you have
loosed will destroy everything
and love will quit the world. (47)

But the crucial moment in the poem that betrays its central dilemma comes after a repeated claim for plain speech:

Let us speak plainly. You wish to
murder millions, as you yourself
have said, to appease your fury. (48)

Apparently, the president himself also speaks plainly and this collapses the dichotomy the poem is based upon: the language of power, it turns out, *is* plain speech. It is concrete rather than abstract, and renders a political conflict into a

confrontation of good and evil, of innocence versus corruption, “honest American men and women” against a tyrant. That the poem’s rhetoric is so vulnerable to deconstruction, that it is indeed on the verge of deconstructing itself, points to the datedness of its underlying assumptions: the opposition of center and margin, of power and powerlessness, corruption and innocence, the individual as rational agent susceptible to persuasion, a representative self and the role of voice, of poetry as generically immune to abuses of language and power, art as direct expression of intention, and language as transparent to the speaker.

This list is a reminder of how poetic form and language are connected to historical formations; consequently, poetic experimentation or the lack of it is not only a question of identifying an avant-garde versus a mainstream but of elucidating why, at particular points in history, it seems poetically and politically dissatisfying to cling to poetic conventions that emerged in earlier socio-political conflicts. Poetically it is dissatisfying because the deconstructions by poets and theorists – and here the so-called Language poets formed the most influential group – have drawn attention to the linguistic conventions used to construct these notions. This was detrimental to the personal, even confessional style of the 60s and 70s because it depended heavily on a denial of rhetoric as a “language of power” and instead presented itself as a sincere and “plain” expression of concern for the common weal. The unmasking of a style by undermining the whole idea of a coherent “voice” happened not just as a necessary renewal of technique, but also because these constructions seemed inadequate to new perceptions of political realities: an emphasis on the moral integrity of individuals disregards the political sphere of interests, institutions, and public relations. A simple opposition of innocence vs. corruption glosses over our complicity in exertions of power – as voters and consumers, for instance. The idea of representation has been complicated by an awareness of its abuses and exclusions. And as Carruth’s poem involuntarily demonstrates, all these assumptions and their respective languages are complicit with common political rhetoric. While this emphasizes the need for “another language,” it also highlights a dilemma not solved by deconstructions: if power and individual agency dissolve and render a rhetorical appeal obsolete, what can replace it? How can a poem sustain a claim for a collective “we” without declaring itself to represent a preexisting community? Wherein lies the constructive power of poetry?

Another Language of Relations

So far, I have backed up the diagnosis of diminishing individual agency and the powerless power of poetry with a text that conveys a sense of the problem without the adequate poetic means to engage with it. Now I want to focus on poems that

do not so much work towards an expression of powerlessness as they take this situation as their starting point and devise ways of working with and through it. In poems by Harryette Mullen, Ben Friedlander, Adrienne Rich, and Juliana Spahr, this involves the recognition of complicity and the acknowledgement of responsibility in human relations. This is done in two distinct modes: Harryette Mullen and Benjamin Friedlander create eerie echoes of *déjà dits*, recognizable by sound structure and key words, but wittily distorted and thereby transferred into different semantic fields. The point is not to remind us once again of the constructed nature of all reality, but to draw attention to particular constructions and the interests underlying them. Friedlander’s “State of the Union” blends references to official announcements and explosives into the diction of “The Lord’s Prayer”:

Stern father in heaven, hollow

Be thy bulletins, spent shells
With powder burns
Delivered by trigger men
Of the cloth. (107)

While the substitutions are often surprising and funny, the combination of a religious language with the language of war in official speech is certainly not. In “The L. B. J. Tapes,” Whitman’s imagery of a radical public self that opens up interior spaces and is to be admitted everywhere (as in “Unscrew the locks from the doors! / Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs!” from “Song of Myself”) is perverted into its opposite, the desire for secrecy of a government that does not want any witnesses: “Unplug the appliances. / Tear the sockets themselves from the walls” (Friedlander 108).

Mullen’s “Land of the Discount Price, Home of the Brand Name,” from *enough*, confounds the difference between the language of patriotism and the language of advertisement: Lines such as “I pledge allegiance to my MasterCard / that is honored in more stores than American Express” or “My country, ‘tis of thee, sweet land of Lipton instant tea!” first suggest the ubiquity of brand names, that is, the domination of public language by commerce as a language with a similar or even higher recognition value (Mullen 108-109). They also draw attention to the fact that words like Liberty, Old Glory, or Independence Day work like brand names: linguistically, they use capitalization and frequently two-part compounds, such as American Express, Cool Whip, or Dixie Cup. Psychologically, they are instantly recognized and, like instant tea, dissolve into a brew of vague associations. They market mass products, and in the poem establish a connection between the notion of shopping as a patriotic activity and the suspicion that, conversely, a patriotic activity may conceal an economic one: at the end of the poem,

the “World Peacekeepers Patriot Soldier,” “a twelve-inch fully poseable action figure that plays the national anthem” becomes part and symbol of a world-wide advertisement campaign.

While Mullen’s and Friedlander’s witticisms prompt awareness and diagnosis, Adrienne Rich’s “The School Among the Ruins,” first published in *Poets Against the War*, presents the voice of a teacher who continues “teaching responsibility” among the ruins: “Don’t let your faces turn to stone / Don’t stop asking me why / Let’s pay attention to our cat she needs us” (Rich 25). Attention to the needs of other creatures in the poem is a last defense against emotional hardening and the strength of this approach is that it realizes resources of affect and values that lie untouched in mere cognitive efforts – this is also the case in Juliana Spahr’s “Poem Written after September 11.” The title suggests the idea of a poetic ‘response’ to a specific event, but Spahr developed her mode of writing before 2001, as one can see in her earlier volume *Fuck You-Aloha-I Love You* (2001). It already repeated a line with which the new poem opens: “There are these things” (Spahr, *Aloha* 7, 9, 11, 15; *Connection* 3). Repetition is indeed an important device of the poem as a large part of it is based on an expanding serial pattern, embracing more and more space; here is the last ‘stanza’ in the series and the turning point:

As everyone with lungs breathes the space between the hands
and the space around the hands and the space of the room and
the space of the building that surrounds the room and the space
of the neighborhoods nearby and the space of the cities and the
space of the regions and the space of the nations and the space
of the continents and islands and the space of the oceans and
the space of the troposphere and the space of the stratosphere
and the space of the mesosphere in and out.

In this everything turning and small being breathed in and out
by everyone with lungs during all the moments.

Then all of it entering in and out.

The entering in and out of the space of the mesosphere in the
entering in and out of the space of the stratosphere ...
(*Connection* 8-9)

The poem may first be described as arising from a meeting of Walt Whitman with Gertrude Stein: From Whitman comes the desire to express a connection with the whole of creation, from its smallest to its largest manifestations. For Whitman as for Spahr, “the kelson of the creation is love,” but in “Song of Myself,” this love

is frequently overpowering, the merger announced by the “I” a threat as much as a promise. Spahr, who avoids grand terms like “I,” “creation,” or “love” is much more careful. The “stratosphere” is as far as she goes, and love is referred to only in the adjective “lovely” as a sense of wonder over the intimacy that arises from breathing the same air everyone else breathes in the same rhythm, “in and out.” To understand how this idea of connection can acquire emotional force without being embodied by a self as in Whitman, we need Stein and her modernist experiments. In Stein, repetition draws attention to language as a system with its own dynamic. Spahr uses a special kind of repetition, seriality, which ‘creates’ the larger part of the poem. It suggests an impersonal logical principle producing larger and larger units. What may seem somewhat cold and rational is actually, as in Stein, a source of humor, too. To recognize a pattern produces the pleasure of predicting and expecting the next element, the uncertainty whether it will actually come up, the curiosity about how far this will go and especially how it will end. As a poetic technique, it connects vernacular forms such as nursery rhymes with the high art of modernism – as Stein reminded us, these are not so far apart.

Spahr uses the expanding series of concentric spaces not only to support an impersonal notion of poetic composition, but also as a mimetic principle giving rise before our eyes and ears to a sense of aesthetic creation as natural propagation and growth. Anaphora and epiphora clearly demarcate the growing units in the series and give them the appearance of independent beings even though, like grammatical offspring, each of them is equally connected by the subordinating conjunction “as” to the parent main clause. The quality of poetic language foregrounded in the text is the one closest to its organic condition, namely breath and rhythm. Note how syllables and beats multiply in the line “cells, the movement of cells and the division of cells,” how the most frequent connective, “and the,” echoes the double-beat of the heart, and how attention is drawn to breathing because, as in “Howl,” one is either tempted to create very large breath-units (and then runs out of breath) or one breathes discretely, in which case the rhythm is likely to assume an even, meditative pace.

As we become aware of breath, we become aware of our connection to others and assume a “we” not based on collective identity but on a form of acknowledgment.¹ It involves recognizing and admitting a relation that affects our attitude

¹ Stanley Cavell and Axel Honneth are two philosophers, who currently try to conceptualize the term beyond the Hegelian “recognition.” Both argue that acknowledgment comes before (Honneth) and goes beyond (Cavell) cognition. In contrast to Cavell, Honneth would apply the term in the context of an ecological consciousness, too, I think. Cf. Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1969, 238-266. Axel Honneth’s *Unsichtbarkeit. Stationen einer Theorie der Intersubjektivität*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003 begins with literature (Ellison’s *Invisible Man*) in order to capture the vague sense of a root of intersubjectivity that will allow him to move further away from the Hegelian concepts he de-

towards everyone. It is a form of love that is careful not to be overbearing, not to intrude, merge or contain, but strives to let things exist and to accept a respectful distance as in the deictic "There are these things." Even "we" occurs only once and in a passive construction that is part of an exclamation: "How connected we are with everyone." Like the exclamation at the end, it captures appreciation without appropriation, acknowledging an existence without instrumentalizing it. Like the crucial word "everyone," it can conceive of an existing whole that is fully inclusive and yet does not do violence to singularity – it is a version of the old problem of the one and the many that has gone through theoretical elucidations of exclusions. That by "connection" the poem comes to mean more than sharing air and pollution can be seen at the end: what is doomed, not least because of the events of September 11, is not the connection itself, but forms of commitment to it. And just like the involuntary but lovely connection through breathing, the doom seems equally impersonal and beyond one's power to prevent.

So where does that leave us with regard to the powerless power of the poet? Friedlander, Mullen, Rich, Spahr and Carruth respond to the same cultural pressures. They register the ubiquity of and complicity with languages of power they do not want to be complicit with, but Rich, Spahr and Carruth also testify to a need for connection, even commitment and solidarity with others. Where Carruth differs from the two female poets is that he assumes a privileged role as a poet, based on the authority of a literary language. If we cannot assume what he assumes, it is because we know as well as he does that the poet is *not* more powerful and representative than any other citizen and that, furthermore, his language has lost the authority it may have once carried. Intersubjectivity in poetry cannot be a starting point but needs to be built from the bottom up; it may follow from recognizing what constitutes our relations to others. A language experiment that arises from a widespread sense of individual powerlessness may become a source of strength when it explores a language of appreciation and respect, of responsibility and commitment that can articulate a sense of why others may have a claim on us.

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veloped in his *Kampf um Anerkennung*. An elaboration of the term as central to a theory of justice and a critique by Nancy Fraser can be found in Honneth and Fraser, *Umverteilung oder Anerkennung. Eine politisch-philosophische Kontroverse*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 2003.

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