

American Poetry in the Age of Trump

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Welcome then, O world made new in my eyes,
O world now one and whole!
O full Credo of things visible and invisible,
I accept you with a Catholic heart

Arthur Rimbaud

Spiritus, ubi vult...

John: 4

A discussion of poetry in general may begin with a reference to Augustine's statement about time. We all know what time is, Augustine said, until we are called upon to define it. So it is that many say they know what poetry is, until they are asked to define it. If they can get over this hurdle with a metaphysical leap, then a higher hurdle presents itself: What is American poetry?

Throughout Western Civilization there have been many attempts to define poetry by both poets and philosophers. In our time, definitions of poetry have been influenced by Marxist social and economic theory. In that vein, we will define poetry in this essay as whatever those who have social power say poetry is. A literary work is a poem because those who have social power say it is a poem.

In an essay of this length, it is not possible, no matter how desirable, to present examples of individual poems that fit the theory advanced here. And why bother, the cynic may ask? It's all the same. Pick up any contemporary book of poems and start to read. The poems all seem to be written by the same female author, the progressive spirit of the times. It is enough to say that the question about the future of poetry in the age of Trump is not a question of theory, but a question of practice and the location of social power. When we locate the focus of social power to define poetry, we will be able to understand why some writings are called poems and others are not. Furthermore, we may be able with some degree of certainty, to predict the future of American poetry.

The situation with contemporary poetry may be analogous to the situation in contemporary art. When a farmer in Nebraska scratches his head and ask what is contemporary art, we could answer him with the same answer we use to define poetry.

Art is what those who have the social power say it is. In this regards, social power lies in the galleries, auction houses and art schools, along with the critical apparatus that supports these institutions. This being the contemporary case for poetry and art, it is logical to ask where are the centers of poetry located and what are the characteristics of their social power.

These days, poetry's social power is located in college and university writing programs, in departments of English, in the big and small presses and journals, and in workshops scattered throughout the country. For the most part, these centers of power are on the east and west coasts of the United States, although regional locations like Chicago and Iowa play a role. Most of these poetry institutions most likely follow a progressive politics and are funded by progressive foundations.

The election of Donald Trump as president of the United States sent shock waves through the progressive, poetry community. The unexpected had happened. How could such a reversal occur? There are many explanations for what happened, but the one that may have the most implications for poetry is the one that focuses on the resentment and revolt of white working-class males.

The so-called deplorables, itself a poetic term, were instrumental in Trump's election. To understand that social phenomena even more, let's consider three aspects often found in poetry power centers. To do so is to point out the contemporary union of poetry and progressive politics in our time, and why the deplorable reject that politics. In so doing, it follows that changes in politics and power will affect changes in poetry.

There are three characteristics that most contemporary poems share. First, although contemporary American poems have their roots in English and US geography, these poems aspire to be international and multicultural. Second, contemporary poems are often grounded in progressive political myths. Finally, today's poems and poets often claim to be the voice of the minority, the voice of the victim and the voice of the so-called marginalized, especially women and sexual minorities.

People used to judge the worth of a poem by the rules of rhyme and meter. Now, poems are judged by their politics. When we exhume the body of T. S. Eliot we see that time has taken its toll. Tradition and individual talent has decayed into an absence of

tradition and no talent at all.

The fact that university faculties are staffed by progressives is well known. Many will choke on the words, conservative poet. The election of Trump points out that many outside of university faculties have become weary of marginal voices. Readers no longer care about an art that is built upon the back of another's suffering, if they ever did. Because victimhood no longer inspires or motivates, let alone encourages a reader to spend his money to buy a book, we can expect that poetry will eventually undergo a transformation in the age of Trump, or simply become irrelevant as an art form.

The dominant metaphor that informed poetry for the last fifty years, the metaphor of civil rights and victimhood is exhausted. This exhaustion happened in spite of Trump's election, yet with that election it may die sooner than later. It is too early to say what new metaphors will take the place of what is dying, but it may simply be a return to standards as the present generation of progressive university faculty retires, and a new generation of conservative teachers ignore the university classroom for the Internet. Ironically, the Marxist avant-garde has always been fifty years behind the times, even though they claim to be on the right side of history.

As the death of the prevailing civil rights metaphor gives way to a new metaphor, so will the voice of American poetry change. If the rise of the white working class continues, then we may expect US poetry to retreat from its international and multicultural interests and become more rooted in the local and the ideals of American exceptionalism. This rise of the white working class may eventually give rise to a uniquely American poetry, a poetry that does not look to Europe or the dead world of a Classical past. The New American poetry may be something like Walt Whitman writing that he has converted from Hinduism to the God of Israel.

These changes in American poetry may happen, but not without resistance from the universities and the centers of publishing power. Their resistance will be to double down on what is already dead. There will be more zombie poets writing the dull academic poem that is in rigor mortis. These poets will wander the campus or haunt the faculty lounges looking for the brains of fresh sophomores to devour. All this means is that the poetry we are used to reading and seeing published will become even more irrelevant. In a generation, no one will care about poems that

describe poor Bruce as a transgendered victim. Poems will no longer be what sociology used to be, a way to "explore larger social phenomena that are often silenced, overlooked, and/or distorted."

We do not know if the Trump presidency will last for eight years. If it does, we may expect to see a few things happening that affect American poetry, slowly but surely. First and foremost will be a drying up of government grants and money for the arts and poetry. Government money for the arts has always been political. Why give money to support an art that does not support your politics? In short, he who pays the piper calls the tune. Progressive poets will no longer be paid to pipe a tune. In the long run because of a lack of funding few poems will be published and few students will study creative writing. They may become tofu chefs and water-ski instructors. Instead of hawking chapbooks they may sell chapstick.

Then there may be a change of taste. This change of taste could be accomplished by a rise of formalism and traditional poetic forms. Poems that begin with the pronoun "I" will become few and far between. The new formalism will not just reproduce the forms of the past, but may even create new ones. This means there will be a renewed trust in language. The marriage that William Carlos Williams made between poetry and advertising will end in a divorce.

Likewise, it is not form we argue about, but content. Because poetry in our time had already assumed the form of advertising, the content of poetry is reduced to nothing more than advertising for the moribund, progressive state. No amount of turning to the Chinese will save the progressive poem.

At its highest, Chinese poetry and painting uses landscape to avoid the personal. Like the flat characters of a cartoon, much Chinese art is devoid of tragedy because it is devoid of a self. The self has always been at the heart of Western poetry, from the ancient Greeks to the present. But not so in China. How else can we account for a whole nation accepting what the Judeo-Christian West has rejected, namely Marxism.

As American poets retreat from multiculturalism, we may see again the creation of masterpieces. No masterpiece is ever created from diversity and multiculturalism. A masterpiece is created by a master who is rooted in the local. Dante was rooted in Florence. The French impressionists were rooted in Paris. It is only with roots firmly located in the local

that a work of art may rise to be universal. To make art the other way around, is to make art for either the socialist or capitalist corporate market.

Those who understand that poetry is not propaganda, also understand that poetry is not an assignment. Yet, to make poetry an assignment is the intention of many poetry workshops and university writing programs. Write a poem about a banana. Write a poem about bicycles. Write a poem about transgendered oppression. By making poetry and assignment instead of the fruit of inspiration, the poem becomes an object in the service of so-called social justice. Furthermore, to say a poem is the product of a poetry workshop, is to appropriate a good working-class word in the service of an illusion. This rubs salt in the wound inflicted on those who work with their hands by an effete, academic elite.

The prevalence of poetry workshops is an admission by academicians that poetry is broken. You take your poem to a workshop and get it fixed. Once there, the white, working-class poet discovers it's not so much the poem that's broken, but the poet. The poet must be fixed. He must learn the tenets of scientific materialism. He must learn to be a victim. He must give up his privilege and write the poem of his victimhood.

Better yet, he must learn to be silent and let the real victims speak. And speak they do, with their metallic voice. The poetry of the workshop millennials is like their music—a desperate attempt to relive the sixties and prove Hegel right: the first time is tragedy, the second time comedy. Without victimhood and civil right the poetry from our current crop of poets would be nothing. Alan Ginsberg gives birth to standup comedians.

Because the workshop poem is an assignment, the poem cannot be an inspired work of art. There is no room in scientific materialism for inspiration. The very word has its being in a spirit that Marxists claim is nothing more than an ideology in service of capitalism. When we are assigned by our professors to write poems about gender oppression, Marxist theory dictates the practice, not inspiration. Pervious poets tried to understand the world, when the point, now, is to change it. Today's poetry needs its victim the same way a drunk needs his booze.

But we must ask as Sophocles did, who is the slayer and who is the victim? In the long history of Marxism in the United States, there have been attempts by the Left to identify the real proletariat.

Today, we have gone from a place where the once working-class as proletariat has given way to the victim as proletariat. We have gone from the poetry of the working-class to the poetry of victimhood. The Trump election, in part caused by a resurrected working-class, means that the poetry of victimhood is now dead. In fact, the poetry of victimhood and civil rights has been dead for a long time. That's why most poetry readings resemble a gathering of zombies.

So, what will poetry in the age of Trump look like? A work of art is never completely about social justice. At its core, a work of art is born from talent, and talent is fundamentally unjust and unequal. Some people have it, and some people don't. No workshops or bottles of vodka will give you talent. You may learn technique and the vocabulary of social justice, but that is not enough. The practically wise know it is not enough, just as they know some countries are shitholes. In short, all that may be left for poetry in the age of Trump is that the poem will return to being a work of art made from words.

To get to a work of art made from words, something must be said about the material conditions of poetry. That is to say, the transformation in publishing poetry that the Internet and publishing on demand has brought about. The elites who have until recently controlled the poetry publishing business are being threatened by technological changes that undermine their authority. The vicious circle of, "He is a prize winning poet because we publish him, but because we publish him, he becomes a prize wing poet," is evaporating. With a computer and a publish on demand printing company, a frail grandmother in Norfolk, Nebraska may sell as many copies of her book of poems as an eminently forgettable winner of the Yale Series of Younger Poets. Which one is a better poet? How dare you ask such a racist, sexist question.

Beyond Norfolk, Nebraska, and as hard as it is to say, poetry in the age of Trump may be rooted also in the realization that nations are part of the natural, human order, just as most men and women are naturally drawn to one another and marry. Men and women will write about this because they are not victims but, as Shakespeare knew, are in thought and action like the angels. Does this mean that at the root of poetry and of love there is something irrational, something outside the purview of scientific socialism? That something cannot be taught in a workshop. It remains to be seen what too many workshops can

ruin, but we do know that when it comes to martinis, there can be too much vermouth.

As American poetry moves from an international and multicultural interest, we may see the rise of a poetry that is rooted in the local. Perish the thought: Nebraska, with its emphasis on traditional American values, could emerge as the new center for an American poetry, even a new American style of painting. Then again, where the new poetry comes from may be unpredictable. The Spirit goes where it will.

Did the spirit already leave Nebraska? When Nebraska celebrated 150 years of statehood in 2017, a volume of Nebraska poems was published that included poetry spanning the state's 150 years. What do we read in this anthology? Without singling out names or titles we may look at two poems in the anthology and note a distinguishing feature about the course of not only Nebraska poetry, but American poetry in general.

When we look at the first and almost last poem in the anthology we see that in the first poem that is written with noticeable stanza, the poet of this 104 line poem uses the personal pronoun "I" only four times. In the poem near the end of the anthology, a poem written about 150 years later, the poet offers us a prose poem, a poem as uncertain about its form as some are today about their gender. In this poem, the personal pronoun "I" is mentioned at least 18 times. What can we conclude from this? One conclusion is that over the course of 150 years the poet as victim intrudes more and more on the poem. Is this good or bad or just a difference in style and taste that has evolved over more than a century? Let's just leave it at that question.

Who knows the future? What we do know is that American poetry cannot continue being what it is now, a cadaver of hope. There may emerge in the age of Trump a poetry that reflects the renewed emphasis on American exceptionalism. Yet, it is doubtful that anyone will sing again of man and arms. Providing there is an America that lasts into the future, a future that soon may be dominated by the Borg civilization of China, we may be in for a surprise.