Charles Altieri

on difficulty in contemporary American poetry

Experimental poetry has fallen on hard times. Poetry that makes its difficulty a basic means to accomplishing its ends seems now mostly a throwback, a fantasy that the excitements of modernist art can continue into the present. It also faces charges of privileging artistic complexity over political obligation, of championing ambivalence over conviction. And, finally, it is often difficult to see the point of difficulty in poetry: isn't the aim to give pleasure and thereby enhance life? So I sometimes wonder whether my commitment to difficult poetry is merely the elitism of an aging critic who mistrusts the simpler pleasures. But then often when I do take considerable pleasure in a poem that is not provocatively difficult, that pleasure turns quickly to guilt, to a feeling that I am betraying allegiances and succumbing to seductions that oversimplify the intricacies of experience.

Partially to convince myself, I want to trace such an event where pleasure turned to guilt and I was forced to recognize by contrast why I persist in these possibly ridiculous commitments. This is a poem that I found quite moving, C. D. Wright's "Utopia" from *String Light* (1991):

Inside of me
there are no cathedrals
even in the vaulted halls
where you thought you would come upon
some providential soul
letting go a cage of doves
there are only vaulted halls.

Inside of me
there is a period of mud,
flies and midges come with the mud
followed by a time of intense sun;
with the sun comes a cool room
furnished by a rotating fan, a typing
machine.
While there is the sun I type then I walk
often for long stretches
in search of hidden springs, curative herbs
or not in search of a blessed thing.

Inside of me
a stranger rubs its knees
against the palings of my ribs
someone who may be born to fail,
a drifter hunched over a cinder block
pitching rock at mounds of garbage,
someone who may catch and tear
like a plastic bag in a fence.

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But beyond this zone
of tire heaps and oil drums
a clearing entertains one tree;
where you thought you would come upon
blades of steel light or where
you thought the doves would collect
themselves
there is only enough soil enough blood
and seed good enough for one tree.

Wright explores many styles, often far more experimental. But I have chosen this poem because I identify with it despite myself, and because I think the appeal to identification is elegantly and seductively handled.

The poem's leisurely pacing sets up the sense of surprise one experiences at the suddenly pointed and parsimonious ending. Three anaphoric stanzas elaborate a single governing metaphor: the speaker's inner self is available for a guided tour. First there is the thwarted possibility that the vaulted halls "inside of me" betoken a cathedral, or even constitute an adequate setting for a soul to engage in religious ceremony. It turns out that these vaulted halls are only empty signs of what could host a spiritual life but does not.

The second stanza seems spiritually less bleak, because there the poem arrives at a better adjustment to powers of agency that the speaker might actually possess and find appropriate for the material conditions provided. These conditions, however, are so distinct from the world of religious expectation that now the presence of an agent disappoints as much as its absence had in the previous stanza. Then in the third stanza the anaphoric structure arrives at someone "inside of me" who may be the poet's demonic other, someone at home in the sense of failure that pervades the poem.

The poem's concluding stanza in effect pushes further inward, to a clearing beyond the zones possessed by demonic others. This clearing contains the realm of utopian possibility, the inner garden. But this is a late-twentieth-century garden, where "there is only enough soil enough blood / and seed good enough for one tree." Why only one tree? Why the insistence on blood as the means of nourishing this tree? And why repeat "enough" three times, as if the repetition were also its own denial, since more than one "enough" can only call the assertion into question. Does the poem suggest that this single tree indicates a willful loneliness excluding the person addressed, or does it gesture toward inclusion? I want to say both. Then the repeated "enough"s would register the uneasy difficulty of both desiring to share the soil and recognizing that this may be a limit case where sharing would be destructive.

I admire the poem largely because this ending refuses clear answers to such questions while managing at the same time not to rest in indeterminacy. The point is not that language fails but that language succeeds by bringing us to a sense of its inherent limitations. The speaker has arrived at a clearing that yields an intimacy and a sense of the specificity of one's own being that beggar description. And in this clearing what playful metaphor has created yields to something else – to the convincing presence of a self who can assert a self-sufficiency won out of facing disappointment.

Now that I have shown why the poem gives me pleasure, I have to ask if the pleasure is a sufficient compensation for my years of learning from the avant-garde to distrust the theatrical way the poem manipulates emotions. Much as I admire the poem's self-confident pacing, I have to admit there is a luxuriating in the domain of metaphoric possibility that is deeply at odds with the bare sense

of sufficiency celebrated by the ending – a luxuriating that seems to bring the poem dangerously close to the self-indulgent portentousness that constitutes one common strand in contemporary lyricism. Of course the poem presents a good deal of irony in relation to its quest to understand the conditions of its own saying – but it does not subject the promise of an inner principle of identity to that irony. Nor does the poem register its species of inwardness as a now anachronistic model of subjectivity, nor does it make any effort to explore alternative locales for selfhood – for example, in qualities of sensation or habits built on ways of engaging social relations.

Yet the poem is beautiful (consider just the vowel music in the second stanza with its elaborate harmony of long *o* and *i* sounds). And the portentousness works because the spare concluding stanza defines so dramatic a contrast with the utopian possibilities raised by the anaphoric rhetoric in the rest of the poem. I cannot not acknowledge this beauty, nor my increasing sense that this suffices for what poetry can offer social life. And yet there is in this very seductiveness proof that the avant-garde spirit from Eliot on has its own crucial social role to play in challenging the ease of identification produced by elegant rhetoric. That modernist spirit wants poetry to take on other roles – to insist that beauty is not enough precisely because it can be so seductive. To fall for beauty is to ignore how much we need the imagination to devise models of the self and of intimacy that make identification problematic and that test other resources for elaborating utopian social relations.

Now consider Joshua Clover's "No More Boffins," not by any means his best poem, but one that I can handle here. This poem is utterly different in pacing, preferring constant impersonal ironic motion to Wright's elaborate focusing. In the place of inwardness, Clover seeks a different locus for subjectivity based on resistance to lyrical and social conventions. Rather than projecting this inwardness for the subject, Clover makes poetry a site where the subject has to experience the strange impersonal or transpersonal dependencies that bind us to our cultural moment:

We were drinking gin and tonics on the terrace when the midi skirt
Came back into style. At this time movies were extremely popular
Although no more than usual, after which many people stopped in
At the Liberty Equality Fraternity Café for ice cream,
The ice cream of novel thoughts. Everyone was wearing
Those sunglasses everyone's wearing. Just a few felicities
Make a movement, the kind that should really have its own comic book
Exploring the great issues of the age but still with boffo action
And a speaking part for the lightbulb.
And so the crowd promenaded, lacking a manifesto,
Yet to have condemned the passésists or started the exclusions,
Scarcely aware they were (in the words of Archigram –
Clever boys, give them their own terrace immediately!)
A moment-village. They goeth abroad in the land.
How long have we been discussing whether we are a part
Of what passes by, and at what point did that become
The main conversation, replacing the summer, our cadastral survey
Of its many crowded quarters, its tuned suburbs and departments,
Its way of being a different sort of parade,

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The kind which can be conveniently
depicted with a spectrum?
Paint samples from Jane's Hardware will
do in a pinch.
Already the fete is erasing itself from the
popular memory
Like exploding instructions, leaving
stained confetti as a reminder
You were supposed to get something done.
Little tasks,
Large problems, philosophers say: Who
will do the laundry
Now that history is coming to an end?
What advantage
Would someone have over me who knew a
direct route
From blue to yellow, far from this shady
way-station
Where we dream aimlessly of love in the
afternoon,
The post-historical kind? However big
you grow in my estimation,
You will always be a dwarf compared to
these buildings,
Their skins glassy and inviting as that lake
just to the west
Of wherever we grew up, you remember,
Something Lake.
The information lurks in the shoals in
forms by now
Almost unrecognizable. Now if only you
could dive sideways.
When is the real holiday, the one for
which everyone gets a sharp haircut,
Cruel atonal singing seeps from the crypt
and the meaning of objects
Is once again up for grabs? Even bricks
were once straw.

The poem begins by quickly surveying several social locales; in effect the poem wants to know what kinds of information might sustain and give substance to its own desire to speak as and for the first-person plural. Clearly this world is too dispersed to allow an "I" to emerge, except in the form of a lamentation for all that it cannot possess of its own social conditioning. But even its "we" comes to our attention as states of consciousness where the festive flow of possible identifications has no anchor, no site where examination and judgment can take hold. And the possibility of a manifesto to give meaning to this flow is quickly dismissed, because the movement that would pen it is only a "moment-village," united not by ideas but by these proliferating processes.

Lines 15 and 16 – "How long have we been discussing whether we are a part / Of what passes by" – thicken the poem's obsession with information, with how one comes to terms with all the ways one registers oneself part of a world – or, in our post-Stevensian climate, parts of worlds. Notice how the lines intricately place time elements against space elements so that geography and history pull against each other. Each dimension is necessary for grasping the "Now," but each involves different kinds of measurements, and each demands different kinds of self-consciousness. Positioned in time, we have to work our way through narrative forms; positioned in space, we find the movement conditioned by the many crowded quarters through which the parade passes. No wonder the poem is driven to surreal notions of how depiction might take place.

The sense of festival made us attend to our social place. But as that sense explodes, the feeling of sociality takes on content primarily as a set of questions that comes to structure the poem. And two interesting aspects of the social come to the fore. First, second- and first-person pronouns now enter the poem because the issue of person is inseparable from these questions about what kind of place the individual might have in working out the consequences of the initial attention to festival. Second, the

speaking presence seems increasingly locked into the postures Clover takes as basic to capitalist society. On the one hand, insecurity reigns because there is fear of being disadvantaged in relation to others; on the other hand, there is the temptation to cultivate one's private being apart from all social relations.

I am not sure how to read the last section, or whether it is best to treat the rest of the poem as a single unit. But I think the difficulty is not a problem with the poem but a problem for the poem – given the situation that has been depicted. Trapped by what we might call the historical geography shaping cultural identities, the speaking presence wobbles between a tentative, unrealizable lyricism addressed to the "you," and an unbearably clear awareness that the facts sustain an order of information more capacious and more determining than the positioned intellect has the resources to grasp. When the speaking presence tries to be expansive about the "you," it is instantly forced to recognize how pathetic the human seems in relation to the buildings that frame the scene. But, good interpellated subject that it is, the speaking presence also lets its fascination with the buildings provide a lyrical hope of reconciliation with the environment. Still, the terms of reconciliation depend on the fantasy that the glass of those buildings will dissolve into the waters of an idealized lake visited in childhood.

The impossibility of that action produces the urgent direct wish for the real holiday, only to bring into the present the sounds of an atonal operatic funeral procession. Dreaming and dying turn out to be dangerously close to one another. However, even if people cannot dive into the lake-buildings, the dream of revolution persists in the reminder that even meanings reduced to straw can become the bricks that get hurled against the dominating glass. The poem is left in the horrible position of refusing to give up on the dream of revolution while it has to recognize how this dream makes every present attachment to the social a source of alienation.

Were an individual to offer this account of alienation, many of us would find his pathos self-indulgent. But if poetry can imagine itself into the symptoms, into an abstracted and nonsubjective version of the pains and uncertainties that shape our relation to our sense of what the social might be, then the dream of revolution, sufficiently tempered by despair, might seem itself an ineluctable part of our culture. Theory can explain why revolution may be necessary and analyze what constrains us. But perhaps only poetry can show how that cry emerges from modes of awareness more intimate, more widely shared, and more desperate than theory can develop.

Identification then is as fundamental a concern in Clover's poetry as in Wright's "Utopia," but almost never in ways that can reinforce us as subjects. As in the work of John Ashbery, we are always already coming upon the identifications that shape us. But Ashbery's fluidity among personal pronouns becomes in Clover a constant sense of how weak a hold we have on the various permutations of self-reference. The ideal of fluidity becomes a measure of the impotence felt when one looks at the many ways individual subjects become utterly bound to their roles and narrow interests.

Clover's poem is not uplifting, even as a bare personal resolve. In fact, its difficulty may be necessary for expressing such bleakness, because then that bleakness can be at least tempered by the play of intelligence. But the difficulty also helps interpret the impotence it renders:

perhaps such impotence is an inevitable result of poetry's inability to find convincing collective voices that might make revolutionary sentiments less wistful and less dogged by irony.

Lynn Margulis

on syphilis & Nietzsche's madness: spirochetes awake!

In the foothills of the Italian Alps, in a snow-draped piazza in Turin on January 3, 1889, a driver was flogging his horse when a man flung his arms around the poor beast's neck, his tears soaking its mane. The horse's savior was the German philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844 – 1900). His landlord later found him collapsed in the square and brought him back to his room, where Nietzsche spent the night writing a flurry of bizarre postcards. As soon as his friend and colleague Jacob Burck-

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