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Touching on Three Questions from:

*Poetry and Empire: Post-Invasion Poetics*

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**“What can a poem do?”**

Some people have resorted to talking to potatoes out of loneliness. Did the potato need a poetic character to be so convivial?

Someone in jail might have subsisted (mentally) on a single poem, or someone laboring under disease might claim that a particular poem helped ease the torment.

And yet, we (assembled here) might find that particular poem ‘wanting’ in its conception, its execution, be it religious or secular, Hebraic or Koranic, Stoic or Cynic, Nationalist or Internationalist.

The one hundred-thousand strong 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Red Armies marching across China, swerving this way and that, over frigid mountain ranges, across treacherous rivers, in such and such combat formation, half-starved—strings of words, vectors penned by Mao himself (in rather archaic poetic forms), memorized, recited out loud, acted on.

Kids have been known to OD in solemn celebration of a particular poem.

People around the world have recited poetic charms in order that the sun, or the moon, might get out of each other’s way...what did *those* poems achieve?

A social order (bolstered), of course, is the shorthand answer; but let’s remain (or pretend to remain, for now) a little *under* “achieved”.

Neruda’s verses, under the cover of night, hastily scrawled onto crumbling cinderblock walls over much the world; an Elouard poem printed onto leaflets dropped by the RAF over the Paris Metro Area during the occupation. Has there been any kind of sustained study as to the aggregate effect of that poem, or *any* individual poem for that matter?

But it stands, and it’s a good question. “What can a poem do?”

And what can the Koran do? “Oh, but that’s a “compilation!”

And what of the Aramaic-to-Greek evangelical “compilations?”

Tyndale was one hell of a poet!

What wretch penned the “Horst Wessel” song?

Was it an effective poem? I’d say yes.

And so was the Internationale.

Ok...so, it appears that the 'sphere of consequence' is more determinative than any singular poem (surprise)...and that a cultural *set* of poems is necessary for the "life" of a "poem."

And do I write one poem at a time? I don't think I do, in the end, I mean logically so, though I feel "I must" and do, write, one poem (or two) at a time.

I wouldn't mind, throughout the next 10 years, to read or better yet, hear *you* recite your next...one hundred and fifty poems.

Wait, don't run away. Isn't this what you wanted?

Amiri Baraka has said that poems act as a barometer of one's developing social consciousness...I would agree with that.

In order to better determine how one's consciousness has changed throughout the years, or months, sometimes, even days, this ideological-interfacing called poetry, as measured through one poem at a time, can be a rather *nifty* thing.

What's demonstrating? Counter-demonstrating, clarifying, befuddling, attracting, repelling, delighting, disconcerting.

Something burst overhead just now, like orange fireworks, pungent scraps of green impulses raining down...

### **"Can poetry challenge militarized language and propaganda?"**

I think so. For example, what if the poets that appeared in the *War and Peace* anthology (recently published by O Books) were given the chance to read widely on the radio or on TV, say, once a week, for two months straight. Before the pundits, or after the pundits, or during. I think many people listening might be less intimidated by (as Jameson coined it) the "prison-house of language." And perhaps this new found boldness would be acquired not only by the poems being frontally resistant (though certainly that too) but also by their swerving around obvious traps and/or slinking into and out of complex social spaces, or by focusing on strange new life constructions, and testing them in even stranger ways.

But that's *if*...which, for now, isn't the case. Such (public) recognition of poets as being legitimate arbiters of any slice of collective social consciousness is slow in coming (in the U.S).

Let's for a moment jump to another social arena, perhaps one more currently available to us. If you listen to the mantras of the Right, you've no doubt heard how deeply concerned Americans should be about the Left presence (or supposed "left dominance") in the Universities. And how that spills onto culture, or *is* culture, corrupter. And so, I am truly heartened that many of my friends have landed positions in the University, and that they're now in the process of enabling people to come and speak, relaying social materials from other arenas.

I could be counted as one of those with new found access to these social locales. One who that, for various reasons, didn't go to the University, but who's striven to craft a writing practice that

weighs in on the same ideological struggles that my compeers are involved in. So that by cross-cutting-in different aspects of related struggles, we can hopefully together—*bilaterally*, challenge what the “proper” role of the poet or poem is/can be, at any given time.

I suppose the best thing that poets did for me at a young age (before I tinkered with writing poems myself) was to give a demonstration of how a (so-called) “proper” social role was a form social control that at base depended on a linguistic construction, and that those roles could be challenged; that poetry with politics combined, could be the “full install.” World-wide “Post”-Colonial writing, in the U.S., the Black Arts Movement, The multitude of Feminist Movements, The Chicano / Nuyorican, and other movements, emphasized *critical-expressive* moments in their respective cultural movements. While other poetic movements, The Language & Post-Language poetries (yes, mainly white, *and* politically conscious) emphasized leaving plenty of “uninstall” (anti-institutional) buttons in their *critical-textual* work. And the whole New York School and Beat Thing thrown in there, so that now, maybe we can imagine a *continual synthesis* of all that, the outlines of a new internationally committed political critical poetry, with enough negativity and critical reflexivity to last into the night.

OK...so what are the numbers of people that can be reached at school readings? A rough estimate, say, for a (busy) poet doing multiple readings, might be as high as 200-300 people per year. And that’s just a single poet. Therefore it might be as high as 9, 000, taking the number of poets present here (app. 34 writers). That’s more people than attended the founding convention of the Labor Party some years back, which was years in the planning. What’s more, represented here, today, is but a *fraction* of our respective (interlocking) poetry communities. And so, sometimes it does very much irk me to hear how we, as poets, are truly the ineffective activists and that we exist only for each other. As many of you already know, I spent a good portion of my life being an activist in different social movements, all the while trying to maintain an active writing life, sacrificing a lot of writing in fact to that activist life. And I witnessed or was part of many triumphs and many more defeats. At one point I remember losing like three whole years of writing poetry. Poof! just like that. But some six years ago, I found myself *re-choosing* to be an activist within *culture*, as *through* culture, because of an overall, comparative estimate as to its effectiveness in expanding our social horizons. But don’t take it from me...listen to our enemies.

So, can poetry challenge militarized language and propaganda?

Yes, in an overt confluence with other social movements, it has a potential to, though it’s also paramount that we talk in the way we need to talk and no one else’s. Forces abound, even friendly ones that tell us to stay in our places, “august” though those places may be. But as the band *Rage Against the Machine* put it—“don’t give us the key, we’ll break it”

**“Are textual critique, parody, and satire adequate responses or do they reify these abuses?”**

Social abuses are social abuses, whether satirical, literal, parodic, meta-referential, what have you. How could there be a resolute answer as regards Parody or Satire or any other basic aspect of language expression? I mean, in the vocabulary of an active dramatist, that the Humble Haikuist is as much a rhetorician, as much a *theatricalizer*, as the Mad Slammer.

Perhaps we should *ask* each other more often about all of our works, their treatments of contradictions within social relations or aesthetic meanings, or basic dispositions toward the audience; and importantly too, ask non-poets who we read to, something we rarely do. Now

*there's* a rotting front tooth worth pulling. And how much do each of us risk a less than perfect smile to *artistic encephalitis*.

Bumper sticker: "how am I troping?"

That "voice" is "dead", that "textual critique" is "cryptic", or that "lyric" or "narrative", is essentially passé—such pieties I want to continuously shed.

What might "reify" social abuses more than a specific genre or expressive modality is a practice of sitting pretty, clutching some tried-and-true method of yore, effective though it was then, now turned to froth. So this endless being hunted by froth. It might behoove us (resolute word-workers) to better understand *froth* in multiple dimensions.

And yes, it's all too true, that we're sinking into a kind of fascism in this country, a kind not encountered before. And it's that very new of form of it that's so dangerous. So my desire is to get serious (with you) about some sort of united cultural front. "United Front," of course, not meaning the artificial cessation of contradictions between us, in what we each do. But that we need to articulate those contradictions openly, while moving towards the *resilient joy* of a common struggle.