

NEOLIBERAL POETRY

A new order has emerged, so quickly & so thoroughly that most of us have yet to notice it has already taken over our lives. This new order runs on the assumption of strong property rights, free markets & free trade as inherent moral goods. Deregulation, privatization, & withdrawal of the state from social services & cultural initiatives are its hallmarks. The individual stands alone, “making it” or not – thriving, surviving, or falling dead to the side – by virtue of the resources that she can marshal & her sole ability to manage them; by the birth-rights of capital, connections, education, last & often least, ability.

Social practices once understood as sites of liberation are now understood with reference to competition in the market; *makers* have become players or entrepreneurs. These days, there’s little sense that poetry is larger than oneself & one’s “seminal” effort, or that community is more than a spotlight for the Me Show. Unfortunately, in this model, we take part in stripping poetry of its power, ceding it to market forces. Lately, it’s become a game: tailor poetic practice to be recognizable within the terms of the academy – poets obviously taking up critics’ concerns in poetic form, pining for a successful surgery from [insert name of hot young critic here]. Poets measure each move – not by love or hope or the imagination, but performance anxiety. What happens when poetry is written by people in graduate school for professors & other people in graduate school? White middle class teacher language. Yet, the progenitors of this, the New American poets, entered the academy with great trepidation. Not bound to the discursive. It’s all become a matter of accruing cultural capital – in short, a tenure-track job & a salary. You can smell the white gloves a mile away.

Which one of your little piggies will you chop off first? Because there are just two positions in the neoliberal order:

CYNICISM: the willingness to cut your feet to order

INFANTILISM: the happy-talk that blinds the other 4 piggies to their predicament

The neoliberal cynic takes a Hobbesian view of things: only the self-interested survive: it’s simply childish to deny “the reality of the marketplace.” This logic subtly prevails in the rhetoric of “innovation” within a closed scene or closed circuit – open for academic trade – the restless watch for the next new style or movement, visible from the high ramparts of the scene. So from a recent conference at St. Mark’s we get the news: “It has become clear in the last 7-10 years that a poetry of quotation & citation in the Pound tradition is over.” = THE FUTURE BELONGS TO ME. “Innovation” & “innovative” are key words in neoliberal poetry, replacing the older formation *avant garde*. Cover words, to be precise: what they hide is a change in poetry’s position vis-à-vis the established order. The Surrealists believed that upsetting the social order – taunting priests in the street, mocking the bourgeoisie – was integral to their work; the Beats made writing of a piece with an emerging counter-culture. Kraut-rockers & their cohorts in the U.S., France, Japan performed as members of the underground, often during rallies & building seizures or to benefit those subsequently jailed. (“In the city of Heidelberg, we managed to put on a daytime show on a hillside facing the famous Heidelberg Castle so that the whole city was forced to listen. When the police showed up to end the concert, we’d already split.”) The ’77 punks, the Diggers & the Situationists also made this connection. For the historical avant gardes, art was not assumed to be political in itself; it was one component of a larger politics, agitation within agitation. “Innovation,” by contrast, means formal experiment, page-politics without lived politics. For the neoliberal poet-cynic, agitation, change – *utopia* – is off the agenda. Instead, the model is dissemination, self-promotion: taking a position (hoping in turn to get a position) instead of taking part. In this way the utopian horizon we might share is reduced to the individual fantasy that *everyone is listening to me*.

The infantile neoliberal, meanwhile, trusts in the authentic self & doesn’t want to be reminded of the larger forces that give shape to that self; most of all, he doesn’t want to hear “all your elaborate reasons for dissent.” Sometimes infantilism is expressed from the standpoint of wholistic ego-poetry. We all have an inner child that needs to be preserved: we have to put aside complicating issues: standing in disagreement, asking difficult or unflattering questions is crude & threatening: it makes me uncomfortable. Where the personal is emphasized, it’s as a matter once again of putting the self on display, this time in the form of stubborn ignorance. I JUST WRITE WHAT I FEEL. Poetry of this school is tantamount to the quiver of a jellyfish-like sentimentality. This kind of bullshit nauseates us. On the other hand, these positions are not reducible to mainstream versus experimental: they represent attitudes & practices across the spectrum of poetry. Infantilism is common in the innovative crowd, mostly in the twin forms of ass-kissing & sloppy practice. Scenester poets who try to fake out a discussion with easy, ingratiating questions – “You want to make love to the scene,” as Lou Reed put it – take on self-importance by becoming the toadies the cynics require, occasionally the unwanted flatterers of puzzled older writers. Poets who write & publish as if categorically filling in the recognized form of the poem of the age – pseudo-phenomenology, bland repetitions of inspirited historicism, etc. – trade in the practice of rogue mindfulness that poetry has been since Modernism for smooth pap & faint notoriety, leaving behind dull pages against which the ambitious cynics’ work can shine.

In opposition to this dominant mode of writing & interaction, we remind ourselves of poetry’s independence from the marketplace, which has persisted for a long time & in various ways. For example, the inability of poets to make real money has often led to radical attempts at sociability: collaborative meetings & workshops held in living rooms & borrowed painters’ studios, small groups assembling mimeo publications late into the night, spontaneous readings in public parks & other open-ended forms of imaginative interaction. There are any number of ways we can get together around poetry. Here’s Robert Creeley, on his work with Olson & Duncan: “We were each of us trying to locate & enter a world made possible, in which what we were doing found relationship, place, a sense of company, response; not simply understanding, but *others*... not simply doing things or writing poems in some sense of collecting eggs... not even sharing but present in this way the world might be & seemingly was, at least in this company. I think all of us were, not to make an easy conjunction, but I think we were each of us in our particular ways trying to both invent & discover a world which would include us.”

¶ BRANDING YOUR MEASURE

Here is the typical language of branding: “Here’s what it takes to be the CEO of Me, Inc. . . . the main chance is becoming a free agent in an economy of free agents, looking to have the best season you can imagine in your field, looking to do your best work & chalk up a remarkable track record, & looking to establish your own micro equivalent of the Nike swoosh.” Under neoliberalism, the contemporary poetry scene – especially the “innovative” scene – has succumbed to branding. Here is some typical recent work from

somebody just out of Brown’s English Department, published by Burning Deck (publishing their own grad students?):

Say forth, say forthwith, in the name of colors, of real colors, in the name of real colors named, in the initial real color named, say Brunelleschi, say curvature, say Sir Francis Crick. For what we are about to receive, not only show all fragile passengers, red in the initial appearance of a material surface, say this is the place, this is the effort on our part, this is where we’d say, “This is.”

Ugh! Precious, deliberately obscure writing that manages to include 15th century Italian architecture & mid-20th century genetics, with I guess a helix in common? Rather than give access to the material supposedly under consideration, the poem asks us vaguely to admire the writer’s breadth of knowledge: “This is” is the extent of it. Superficially, the poem looks to Gertrude Stein for its style, but where is the radical investigation of everyday usage? Rather than test the limits & capabilities of public language, such writing creates a “personal” language – i.e., a BRAND: post-Stein, tempered by the pose of academically certified knowledge. Dissertation topic anyone? Or check this one, from a well-known younger writer:

perhaps
duration sits
looking
reflecting
a drift in
leagues

Pseudo-phenomenological abstraction! Poetry that kind of talks the language of academic phenomenology without the least interest in applying that knowledge to an experience of the world. & all in the quasi-mystical tone of endlessly drifting self-satisfaction, as though to speak from a mournful quietude – the hallmark of the first-person lyricism supposedly being deconstructed.

Look, we love Language poetry! But it is absolutely a betrayal of what makes Language poetry so great to turn what we’ve learned from its makers into the NEW FORMALISM. It’s all a question of where you put the emphasis: on the self or on the poem; on the art product or on the shared activity of making. Language Poets learned to “bend” the line from Williams, Mayer, Stein, Duncan – but didn’t become imitators of those poets, because they understood themselves to be involved in their own lives, the life of their own historical moment. Now Stein lite, Language lite, & lite versions of too many more socially, politically, & formally radical writers to name, have become brands. Bending, as in Duncan’s work, produces tension & disequilibrium; BRANDING gives an air of bending to the vanilla-straight. You get to have it both ways: all the sexy “queerness” without having to strain yourself.

This poetics is no longer social. It’s no longer a conversation, let alone a utopian effort to “invent & discover a world.” Instead each individual puts forward, in verse & essay, their own vision. The much-criticized *Writing from the New Coast* issues of *o-blèk*, published back in ’93, are an early manifestation of this cultural logic. Instead of an emphasis on dialogue or collaboration, each poet is represented by their own poetics statement, each statement unconcerned with those that surround it. Most of the poetry in these collections takes for granted that the demolition or deconstruction of the “lyric I” of liberal humanism is a necessary poetic process. Yet the poetic statements reaffirm the “I” at almost every level: “Light was my daughter’s first word, I said to Ilona Karmel over beers (she over tea, I under three beers), the novelist whose name is frequently used in the *Sunday Times* Crossword Puzzle because, she says, it has so many vowels in it, misrepresenting rumor of fame. . . .” This is a statement of poetics! Sounds like you are more interested in telling us how close you were to (for lack of a better word) fame than what (if any) your principles are. Meanwhile, we’re well into a quarter century – a full goddam’d human generation – of poetic deconstructions of the self & everybody’s more settled in their individualism than ever before.

Or consider the text we recently saw framing an otherwise inspirational show at NYU’s Gray Gallery – “Semina Culture: Wallace Berman & his Circle.” Berman’s beautiful, small-scale, hand-distributed zine of the 1950s was described as “an alternative exhibition space for artists producing edgy work that was not shown in commercial galleries & as an outlet for young poets struggling to publish through limited channels.” Now just what does *edgy* mean in this sentence? Like *innovative*, “edgy” is a neoliberal band-aid that covers the destruction of non-market-oriented forms of social reproduction. Look at that phrase, “struggling to publish through limited channels”: as though the marketplace, with its unlimited channels of distribution, were a freedom they lacked; kept from the art market & the publishing game, supposedly these people made their own routes in, & therein lies their radicalism. In fact, most of the writers exhibited in this particular show were writing *for each other*, not for their careers; in those considerably less competitive times they were not “struggling” so much as productively – *freely* – rubbing up against each other.

“Edgy” is a primo compliment in the neoliberal order: it connotes being poised at the far side of marketability – too cool for the squares, but ultimately saleable; in the position of the future of the market, *cutting edge*. By contrast, here’s Kevin Killian describing some of the artists represented in the exhibition:

Their works were “secret” since their only audience was themselves. Paintings & sculptures were made, shown, bought, destroyed, thrown out, painted over, all in a short period of time. There was little thought of tomorrow, of preserving the work, or even of documenting it, & no interest in “reputation” beyond the narrow confines of the local scene. When Wally Hedrick & Jay DeFeo “made it” into the epochal “Sixteen Americans” show [MOMA, ’59-60], for example, they did not even bother to attend.

Now here’s a recent entry from a New York poet’s blog: “There was an unusually small turn-out for the reading. This seems to me a curious fact where K is at the top of her game, & C has emerged as a significant younger poet & seminally artful publisher of new writing.” *Ugh*.

C. ALEXANDER, K. GALLAGHER, M. REGAN  RUBBA DUCKY: 2 UH-OH SEVEN