

## David Gewanter

### *Albatross: Notes on the Poet's Social Role*

Everyone knows a hapless poet, some sweet ungainly figure like Baudelaire's albatross who cannot stand fast on the rocking ship of state. Should we rebuke him for not joining «all hands on deck» – that is, for suffering some «formal» flaw like having wings instead of hands? Attacks on artists who apparently ignore the «social real» remind one of Stalin's barrage against Shostakovich. Or maybe we should instead let the poet, like the intellectual Czech presidents Havel or Masaryk, take the wheel. Masaryk, after all, was a member of the «Realist Party».

What relevance can a poet claim today? An aesthetic choice in Modern poetry, established a century ago, may have produced a social consequence for contemporary poetry. For as David Antin understood: from the Modernism you choose, you get the post-Modernism you deserve. Contemporary American poets may be following either the Modernism of T.S. Eliot or the one of Ezra Pound. (Our pivotal moment is closer to 100 than 150 years ago. In 1856, English-speaking people could recite the Bible or Tennyson, and Nietzsche had yet to kill God.)

Eliot, as well as W.B. Yeats, Wallace Stevens, or Marianne Moore, gave us a portable modernism that entered the social world, that contended with it, and that sometimes answered it. Their modernism is comprised of remarkable poems that broke new poetic ground – remarkable *because* they broke new ground. People might, for example, memorise such poems, and recite them. The poems might be heard – for better or worse – at a wedding, a funeral, or even in a bedroom. This art has changed our head – that is to say, changed our eye, ear, mind, and mouth – into an instrument of poetry. Accordingly, we have carried poems physically into our culture's large room of conversations.

Pound (along with Charles Olson, and, in a sense, the James Joyce of *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*) gave us a more pure modernism, one that has not entered this room. For their modern works have since become enveloped in commentary – a membrane of notes, references, interpretation – that helps detail their imagined world for us. This imagined world is a crucial lens on our social and historical life; however, the creative works are not recited by heart, are not carried into the boardroom or the bedroom. In this postmodernism, poetics (and perhaps the «poetical element») are not fully tested in the central proving ground of poetry: a successful poem. For a middling poem, one that can't get you a date, can still be claimed to make a great advance in poetics. It is the poetics, then, that join the conversations – an intellectual gain. Yet the poem is less

often heard, and carries little voice in social discourse – an artistic defeat, perhaps.

So: one postmodern poetry has social access; the other does not. Does that make one kind of poetry more successful? In Washington this year, many poets have gained relevance by writing in the common language of the day, and by writing against the Iraq War. Even though that fits my first depiction of postmodernism, their poems are not very good. As for a poetry that has instead turned away from contemporary language and urgencies – the second postmodern poetry – you can find it in Seamus Heaney's wonderful new book, *District and Circle*. (His work, however, can travel without the shell of commentary.) By whatever means, the best poem may eventually win our attention, despite the contemporary responses from the «social real». After all, Stalin berated Shostakovich as a recondite «formalist» for his socially-conscious «Lady Macbeth of Minsk»; in a later piece, the composer chose instead a private language, spelling his name in musical notes, and was not attacked.

Regardless of the style of postmodern poetry produced, it is that resonating instrument – our head – that will enter the room of conversations. If poetry's language cannot dominate our head, then we will instead carry shreds of songs, of hip-hop or rock, or just advertising jingles. Montale describes this process beautifully in «The Second Life of Art»; but we should note that even a shredded-up song can multiply its effect and identity beyond any «purely economic profits».

I've offered the image of a room of conversations; probably, it is more of a noisy hotel lobby, or maybe a smoky restaurant from the movie *Casablanca*, with many small tables and whispered remarks; with some drinks, some thugs, a piano, a wheel of fortune, and a bedroom upstairs. There is no «social mandate» here beyond everyone having come inside the room, and sat down on the margins. The squawk of so many albatrosses! Legend has it that the albatross, for food, will peck the blood of its parent (Stalin? Bush?). But inside this restaurant – in *Casablanca*, as in contemporary America – there are African-Americans, Russians, Frenchmen, Spaniards, Germans, Bulgarians, Moroccans, and one chain-smoking *maudit* from New York. To some extent, each of them represents a language group; yet there is no central language to join, thank goodness, and little hierarchy. Let each poet wait in line for drinks, and wait for the microphone.

[a cura di Antonella Francini]

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