

2014

How Poetic Is It?: A Conversation

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Recommended Citation

Perloff, Marjorie and Vanessa Place. "How Poetic Is It?: A Conversation." *The Iowa Review* 44.1 (2014): 63-73. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.7441>

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How Poetic Is It?: A Conversation

A note from the participants: This conversation was conducted via e-mail, with Marjorie Perloff initiating most of the questions and Vanessa Place not necessarily answering them in a straightforward way. The dialogue thus took many unexpected turns—a beginning again and again rather than a linear progression. We both found this non-method a useful way of proceeding.

Marjorie Perloff: Vanessa, in your very dramatic lecture for the symposium “Lament of the Makers: Conceptualism and Poetic Freedom,” hosted in April 2013 by the Princeton Graduate Colloquium on Contemporary Poetry, you launch a strong attack, as you have for years now, against the lyric “I.” In what is printed as Part 3 on *Harriet*, the blog of the Poetry Foundation, you say scathingly that “the lyric ‘I’ is the gold standard of poetry, the presumptively inflexible ingot that is believed to be the purest of the pure, the surest of the sure, the thing that both permits poetry and makes semicapitalism totally legit.” But since “poetry,” from the late eighteenth century on down, has been, for all practical purposes, equated with lyric poetry, since the lyric “I” has been ubiquitous from Goethe and Blake to the present and has been at the very heart of poetry in communist Russia as in the capitalist West (think Mayakovsky, Akhmatova, Tsvetayeva, Yevtushenko, Brodsky), why is it so objectionable NOW? When, precisely, did we start to question lyric subjectivity? Can we historicize the situation a little more fully? Why is lyric now related to capitalism and what is the *geography* of the lyric “I”?

Vanessa Place: I don’t object, just describe. But you are right to further particularize; I’ve said before that history is geography, and so, evidently, is poetry. The lyric “I” that served to flutter alongside the Soviet (if not strictly against communism, against the failure of its utopian ideal) may be considered somewhat differently than the lyric “I” that beats next to the heart of the Western capitalist, and that might too differ from the one in Paris, where the Academy would regulate the meter, or the one in London, with its redress of Industry, Aristocracy, and Enlightenment, or the one in New York, where rank individualism has always carried the day. And the postmodern riposte

of the purer hydra-headed “I” is just so much cross-marketing. What’s curious to me is the embattled posture of the lyric in all this—please advise. My argument at Princeton was that the lyric should acknowledge itself as the best articulation of the “I” that cultural capital can buy, and start cashing in. To pretend otherwise, that lyric here and now is as lyric there and then, is either dumb or disingenuous.

MP: Is the lyric so “embattled”? Or just very tired and weak? I’m still trying to figure out why what was possible a hundred years ago is so impossible today. In 1913, Mayakovsky wrote his famous *Vladimir Mayakovsky: A Tragedy*, which was, of course, not a “tragedy” at all but a long lyric! It begins (in Guy Daniels’s translation):

Can you understand
why I
quite calmly,
through a hailstorm of jeers,
carry my soul on a platter
to be dined on by future years?
On the unshaven cheek of the plazas,
trickling down like a useless tear.

The Futurist poets who heard Mayakovsky read this at the Stray Dog Café or elsewhere were enchanted. Roman Jakobson recalls that, as a sixteen-year-old high school student, he sneaked into the reading and was thrilled.

So what happened? In an essay I wrote back in the 1980s, “Postmodernism and the Impasse of Lyric,” I argued that it was the absolute distinction between journalism and “art” made by Mallarmé and his fellow poets that was a kind of dead end for poetry. Poets felt that in a mass society and a mediated culture, they had to opt for Literature or Life. “Postmodernism,” I wrote (I now wouldn’t want to use the word, but I’ll stick to the idea), “begins in the urge to return the material so rigidly excluded—political, ethical, historical, philosophical—to the domain of poetry.” So whereas Mayakovsky relied—brilliantly, it’s true—on metaphors and extravagant conceits for the expression of personal feeling, his remained a poetry of exclusion. And today that exclusion seems so out of date. You, for instance, are writing a “poetry” that allows the “non-poetic” entrance into the language world and defamiliarizes it. But poets hang on to the Old Lyric as to a life raft. And the hydra-headed—the supposedly fragmented or

multiplex “I”—is, as you say, just a variant on the same theme. Or is it? Many poet-critics won’t accept this denigration of lyric subjectivity. In an essay for the *Boston Review*, Cal Bedient has recently called you the “spokesperson for the new cynical avant-garde,” an advocate of “hollowness” in poetry. How does this strike you?

VP: Like the sincerest form of flattery. What’s more interesting are the three threads that you have braided here, and I wonder if they can be teased out into another rope (from which I shall surely swing). First, the very specific gesture of the lyric in Mayakovsky as his great disavowal of the past that would combine with his desire to impose a “dictatorship of taste,” which was of course realized under the Soviet. As you know, Mayakovsky the poet is the only character with a proper name and occupation in the poem you cite—and the lines after the one you quote read:

I
may well be
the last poet there is.

Maybe so. He certainly had to shoot himself right in the heart after lyric smashed against later life. Second is the way that Old (and Newish) Lyric preserves the distinction even as it would disavow the exclusion. It’s not life or even thought its adherents are after, but a kind of masticated paste or paste-up of what life ought be, which they are happy as their larks to tell us, endlessly. Bringing me to the stranger third: the voice of the poet as such, which keeps piping throughout your question—the thrill of hearing a reading, the cynical spokesperson, etc. One of the pouts about Conceptualism is the performativity of its practitioners, even down to our very stylish outfits. But our bodies are, as it were, ourselves. And that includes the physicality of voice: it is harder to dismiss *Statement of Facts* as not-poetry after a hearing.

In other words, there may be something about the wild materiality or the “as such”-ness of Conceptualism that tosses Lyric on its ear. Whether it’s the overly concrete form of the written text, the too-Real of the content, or the too-performative mode of its articulation, there’s a shot in the arm to public taste that makes most lyric seem rather puny and terribly precious. Any “hollowness” advocated therefore is simply the void that Lyric would tat up, or, to quote Mayakovsky again,

Patch up my soul
so the emptiness can't leak out!
I just remove the patch. But this may be a thankless task to
those on a life raft.
My question to you, then, is the historical/geographical impor-
tance of the spoon in the lapel—

MP: Touché! Your Mayakovsky quotes make your case very neatly. “Patch up my soul / so the emptiness can't leak out!” would be a nice epigraph for some contemporary poetry books I can think of! On the other hand, the Dada gestures—yellow blouse, painted face, spoon in the lapel—have been picked up today by some of the Conceptualists like Kenny Goldsmith, and your “costumes,” although the epitome of cool, rather than Mayakovsky hot, constitute a similar gesture of shock and rebellion.

But let's leave leaky souls behind for the moment and turn to more immediate issues relating to your work. I have been having a wonderful time reading the three volumes of *Boycott*, especially the Simone de Beauvoir sections. In an interview with Andy Fitch, you remark that “when I started working with de Beauvoir, I felt thrown into some kind of ontological abyss by the easy essentialism, the easy gender constructs,” and indeed your transposition of gender, as in “It's the dream of every young girl to become a mother” into “It's the dream of every young boy to become a father,” is a wonderful send-up of gender pieties. And I love the substitution of “ejaculation” for “menstruation,” as in “The first menstruation is usually traumatic.” I think it's true that, as you say, “the boycotts trace this fundamental truth that what we really want are gender categories.” A really thick perception! But what would you say if I suggested that *Boycott* is an important piece of theorizing—a work of serious and sophisticated parody, and yet hard to classify as “poetry,” no matter how much I stretch the definition of poetry. So my question is why do YOU want it to be classified—given that classifications never quite go away—as *poetry*? Do you consider Helène Cixous's *Laugh of the Medusa* poetry? What about Lacan?

VP: Once again, I am going to tweeze apart your question into a smaller series. First, there is the question of what is poetry? And this alone raises the matter of defining an *a priori* poetics or Poetry. Second, the engagement with classification posed by *Boycott* itself. And third, the

phenomenological question posed by your nominatives. So here is my poetic return:

What is the upshot
of all
that these words
articulate?
Not knowledge,
but confusion.
Well then,
from this very
confusion
we have to draw
some lessons,
since it is
a question
of limits and of leaving
the system.
Leaving it by virtue
of what?—
by virtue of a thirst
for meaning,
as if
the system
needed it.
The system doesn't need it.

You tell me.

MP: Are you saying that if this passage (from Lacan, I take it) is lineated, then everyone would consider it a poem? You know that I have long objected to that particular signpost as such. So, what is it when set normally as prose? But let's move on. I just came across the most delightful passage in John Cage's conversation with Daniel Charles in *For the Birds*. Charles keeps pressing Cage, criticizing him for "rejecting the emotions." Cage begins with the usual rejection of ego and his sense that "You can feel an emotion; just don't think that it's so important." But as Charles keeps asking the same question, Cage finally gets a bit exasperated and says, "But today, we must consider the *ecology* even more than the individual. . . . Instead of being proud of our petty emotions and our little value judgments, we must open

ourselves up to others and to the world in which we find ourselves.... Open [the ego] up to all experiences." So Charles asks, "And according to you, those experiences do not include the emotions???" Cage (disgusted) responds, "I see that you're still on the level of *object*, while I am talking about *process*!"

We're still having this conversation, it seems. But why?? Why is mainstream poetry culture so especially regressive right now? Did you see that the Wallace Stevens Award, the big enchilada of the American Academy of Poets (\$100,000) was just won by Philip Levine, who has himself said in an interview that his feelings were so strong, he wished he didn't need words to express them, the mediation of words being such a drag!

VP: They are a drag, especially his. Re: regression, it must also have been a drag to learn to paint and have the camera and/or that bottle rack pop onto the scene or sculpt and have someone come along with a backhoe and make a lovelier hole. And poetry culture as a whole is fighting for its irrelevant life, and isn't that its own argument? There is something rather awful about the mastication of self duly dolloped into the orifices of others—but mainstream poets are no guiltier of this than many of those who fancy themselves experimental. At least the mainstream seems more or less oblivious to its politic, whereas the experimental is just another genre. But there is a serious issue here about the desire for post-Romantic poetry to articulate the Poet via poems compared to some earlier mandate to witness the age via Poetry. Two questions: is this then the difference between poetry and poems? And is the great destructive potential of Conceptualism its potential fidelity to the deadly ambiguity of the semantic as process and project? If I hold the mirror just so, the paper will burn.

(My poem above, incidentally, is from page fifteen of my translation of Lacan's *Seminar XVII*.)

MP: Let's now look more closely at what you refer to as the "deadly ambiguity of the semantic as process and project." The question is corny, I know, but I'd love to know, Vanessa, when did you begin to write poetry and what was your sense of what that meant at the time? Which poets were you reading? Was *La Medusa* your first big project?

VP: No, just the first one that was any good. And *Dies: A Sentence* was done between drafts. Poetry throughout, although there was a patch when nothing but stabs at fact or philosophy would do. Something

about the law made most poetry insufferable, fiction an abomination. Poets of significance who come to mind: Celan, Rimbaud, Ingeborg Bachmann, Stein, Mallarmé, Issac Rosenberg, Lucretius, Akhmatova, Apollinaire. Read Dante compulsively, tailoring the translation to the mood of the day. Things to be read aloud—Milton, Pope, Pound, Ovid, and Golding’s translation of, which is terrific for Shakespeare. There’s no illuminating order to it, I’m afraid: because I didn’t come out of any particular school, I just read whatever struck me as needing to be read by me.

MP: A fascinating list and provides real insight into your work. I want to come back to the notion, which interests me a good bit, that “the law made most poetry insufferable, fiction an abomination.” The Trayvon Martin story is a case in point: the withholding of information and gradual leaks, the legal ramifications and arguments: it was a much more dramatic and emotionally charged narrative than comparable attempts to “invent” such a story. Your *Statement of Facts* makes that very clear. Do you want, for *Iowa Review* readers who may not be familiar with this seminal text, to talk about this issue of fact/fiction a little more? What’s at stake?

VP: Your question courts melodrama—like life itself. *Statement of Facts* (and here we pierce the veil of the interview format, though that’s an optical metaphor and this feels more aural, while it is of course entirely retinal) is a self-appropriation of the narrative portions of an appellate brief, those sections that summarize the prosecution and defense testimony about the crime itself. *Statement of Facts* consists of thirty-three cantos, each concerning a felony sex offense, and is one-third of the trilogy *Tragodia*. The other volumes are *Statement of the Case*, a similar presentation of the portion of the brief that chronicles the procedural history of a case, and *Argument*, which is rather self-explanatory. *Statement of Facts* renders explicit the correspondence between law and poetry as sheer language, a correspondence that, to my mind, becomes a confluence. People say things in a courtroom; some of these things are more believable, more plausible, to other people in the room. These become facts. These facts are heard, which is to say read, by a reviewing court, which promulgates law. This law is in turn applied to future words in future courts, though each turn has some opportunity to inflect fact and law, as Eliot noted of all subsequent poetry. Poetry too is language that is heard or believed and involves some claim to witnessing, to saying something that has that

qualia of law and fact, fact and law. Note that I've not discussed fiction in the slightest. Fiction makes no claim for itself on fact, and fact cannot countenance fiction. Poetry is of course a fiction, but, like painting, its artifice is understood as part of its materiality. So some of the work of a work is in holding the tensions between what it is and what it cannot be—the flesh that seem to blush beneath the marble, or the way one weeps (real tears) at opera. Put another way, every medium or genre resists its *donnée*: just as a painting will shove away from simultaneity and fight for temporality, a poem argues for presence, for immediacy. And law lays claim to fact. These gestures are entirely game-driven: in a courtroom, *Statement of Facts* functions—*ça marche*—while in a gallery or museum, the language weighs heavily about the hands. Reading in a barroom, which I have done on occasion, hangs many heads. And then there is the matter of outrage.

There is also the matter of my presenting this work as “poetry” rather than “writing,” and that provokes another form of resistance, as previously noted. People tend to answer the question “what is poetry” by answering the question “what was poetry.”

MP: Your comment here on *Statement of Facts* is a very important “statement” of its own, especially the notion of how things said turn into “facts.” But then isn't the very transformation of “fact” in the course of courtroom activity itself the process we call “fiction”? Remember that in chapter nine of the *Poetics* (still my bible), Aristotle said that poetry is much more philosophical and important than history because history can only tell us what *has happened*—what Alcibiades said or did—whereas poetry deals with what might or could happen possibly or probably (the *katholou*). Now one can argue that poststructuralism has taught us there is no such thing as the “what has happened,” that even the smallest factoid is called into question, but the notion of FICTION as imaginative writing, as invention, is not likely to go away. It's been around since Gilgamesh or earlier, and it's not clear to me why you are so opposed to the term.

I would argue that if terms like “fiction” or “poetry” are no longer to be taken for granted for the reasons we've discussed, they are nevertheless *there* and can't be simply dismissed. You remember when Stanley Fish wrote his bombshell article “How Ordinary Is Ordinary Language?,” proving that you can't make a hard-and-fast definition between “normal” and literary language. Commonsensically and rationally, Fish is right. But the fact is that we do, in real life, believe there is a difference and act accordingly; otherwise, for example, we

wouldn't need to have this discussion at all and *The Iowa Review* would not need to exist and we could all be happy reading "expository" writing. So I'm asking, what's at stake? And a related question: at this writing, the Poetic Research Bureau in L.A. has announced a reading of the work of the forty-nine poets who were cut out of Paul Hoover's *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology* to make room for new ones, including you! Evidently, there's been quite an uproar about the "fairness" of the omissions. What is going on here?

VP: Differentiation is not opposition in spirit, but in kind. What I am underscoring here is that fiction takes its "fictiveness" as its given, whereas the law makes some claim on fact that is purged, by virtue of the fictions of the legal system, of fictiveness. Of course, we are talking about facticity versus fact, a distinction that has escaped some reviewers of *Statement of Facts*, who rather thickly mistook my engagement with the Real for a belief in a reality (and this is another lengthy parsing of things that may exist outside perception and things that mayn't). Herzog said somewhere that "facts do not create truth," and that's as good an observation as any. So this may be my medieval cleric's way of agreeing with you while arguing that the Aristotelian "might have been" proves *Statement of Facts* as poetry. What's at stake, I suppose, is poetry's understanding of itself as having some sort of essence, like painting had, or sculpture had. As I recall, we talked once about what a positivist definition of poetry would be—as opposed to my stance that poetry is just that which is not not poetry within the institution of poetry.

N.B.: I've recently been reading about sound and voice and thinking about how the delay in these mediums is linked to the poetic delay, or, contrarily, to its claims for immediacy. Not so much in terms of the aural tradition of poetry, but rather as a way of contemplating the lyric subject, that dodo yet among us. And wondering if the sense of sound in poetry serves precisely this purpose: does one thus move from being the thinking-thing to the sounding-thinking-thing? Conceptualism then deferring the sound to its hearing thing, like the tree fallen in the forest.

As to the anthology, it's a bummer being a mortal bard. As for fairness, this is mere madness...

MP: I think the case you make for *Statement of Facts* as poetry is convincing, precisely by classical definition—a making of a new thing with its own ontology. What impact, do you think, has *Statement of*

Facts made on the younger Conceptualist or post-Conceptualist poets now writing? Are there any poets you'd like to talk about as doing interesting work? What do you predict for the poetry of the immediate future? And is the relation to the art world getting more symbiotic or the other way around? This last question is not rhetorical: I myself really don't know. Sometimes it seems that the verbal and visual are further apart than ever, despite all the talk of interdisciplinarity. Since you're one of the few people who review both artwork and "poetry," I'd like to have your sense of the situation.

VP: Your last question is the most pressing and ties back to your very first: art still considers language capable of conveying something of the unadulterated (lyric) subject. I see many otherwise entirely sophisticated artists treat language as a shopping cart, bearing some meaning or another from shelf to checkout with the unvarnished sincerity of a pound of ground round. And many exhibitions are described as "poetic" in the dewiest of fashion. But I want art that is poetry, poetry that is art. Spoonier spoons. Andrea Fraser writes about the violence in contemporary art as being art's violence against itself—as Art empties the world of representation and function in favor of form. The violence of Poetry is its failure to do more than dismember and remember the power of the speaking subject. "I" still = *I*, no matter how many times it's multiplied. If *Statement of Facts* has had an impact, perhaps it is that poetry has been returned to its original point of violence, the violence of the voice: it does not originate where it emanates, it does not say what it says. And yet it is, and yet it does. To quote Stevens: "What it seems / It is and in such seeming all things are." And this is why poetry is now fifteen minutes ahead of art.

MP: I concur happily with the notion of "Art empty[ing] the world of representation and function in favor of form"! So, now that we've reached this succinct theorem echoing Stevens's "What it seems / It is and in such seeming all things are," shall we wrap things up with the following question? How do you see the future of poetry/poetics in the coming decade? How will the kind of poetry we want relate to the so-called "poetry" ubiquitous on the publishing scene and in the creative writing workshops? In the twentieth century, the second decade was an age of artistic revolution: I still believe in the "rupture" I talked about in *The Futurist Moment*. Will it happen again? If so, how and where?

VP: In a fit of optimism, I want to say that we're in it. Only our rupture sounds more like a slow hiss. Something about a whimper, perhaps. Which would be the noise of all those affably bleating hearts as they craft their fitted verse. The question is whether all this—the use of sound and social media, of institutional critique and sucking-up, of art and anti-art, of disruption and purposeful corruption, of all the tactics and stratagems that can be deployed and are being deployed to revolt against something, if only ourselves—will be gently absorbed or shaken off. And that's simply absorption on a deferral plan. So, as Craig Dworkin has argued, there will be Conceptual poems by non-Conceptual poets, Conceptual-like poetry, or -lite poetry, the emergence, as you argue, of a lyric Conceptualism, that will be as terribly efficient as any hybrid, or it will lie fallow for a while and then roar up again, like Dada, like Duchamp. Like Stein. The problem is that when so very many bombs are thrown in so very many marketplaces, it's hard to tell in the moment when there is a boom that matters. Like art matters, like poetry will matter. Like the matter of fact of form.

MP: I think you're right. Some years from now we'll be able to see which bomb detonated and where! In the meantime, I'll close with one of my favorite Wittgenstein propositions, this one from the *Cambridge Lectures, 1930–32*:

A copy is a copy only in reference to its intention. Mechanical reproduction in itself can't be wrong, and so differs fundamentally from intended copying. The expression of the intention can't contain the intention, for language can't explain itself.

Language is space; statements divide space. Language is not contiguous to anything else. We cannot speak of the use of language as opposed to anything else. So in philosophy all that is not gas is grammar.

A copy is a copy only in reference to its intention. There's a notion for those "against Conceptualism" to think about!