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Mutlu Konuk Blasing: Lyric Poetry

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Introduction



“MAKING CHOICE OF A HUMAN SELF”

It is the human that is the alien.

—Wallace Stevens

POETRY HAS PRESENTED a problem for disciplinary discourse from the beginning. “There is an ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry,” Plato declares; he gives no evidence and makes no argument as to why poetry would have a quarrel with philosophy, but his own discourse offers clear evidence of philosophy’s issue with poetry. Poets are banned from the Republic, ostensibly on the grounds that mimetic fictions are imitations of imitations and thus twice removed from Truth. This threat to the discourse of Truth would not in itself pose a practical danger if it didn’t also appeal to something “within us” that does: these “productions which are far removed from truth . . . are also the companions and friends and associates of a principle within us which is equally removed from reason” (1974, 77, 73). If “epic or lyric verse” is allowed into the state, “not law and the reason of mankind . . . but pleasure and pain will be the rulers in our state” (76). For along with the “manly” principle of reason, is a “womanly,” “other principle, which inclines us to recollection of our troubles and to lamentation, and can never have enough of them, [which] we may call irrational, useless, and cowardly” (75, 74).¹ The real threat, then, is not mimesis but a language use that mobilizes emotions, the variability and inconstancy of which pose a further problem (75). While “reason” would standardize a citizenry of coherent, self-determining subjects in charge of the “city” within their souls, the “other principle” is subject to variations, both within and among individuals. Poetry plays to the volatile part of our “nature” and thus has the power to create “bad” cities: it can move the “promiscuous crowd” at “public festivals,” for it is a “sort of rhetoric which is addressed to a crowd of men, women, and children, freemen and slaves” (75, 37).

On the social level, poetry threatens the project of establishing order in the “city” within the citizen as well as in the city of discourse;² it stirs unruly emotions, which are subject to different kinds of persuasions, and it has mass appeal.³ But at the discursive level, the threat of poetry is not a threat of anarchy, for the autonomous, stringent orders of the linguistic and formal codes are evident. Rather, it is the threat of a different system underwriting—and, therefore, in effect overruling—the order of reason. What imperils rational language is what enables it: a nonrational linguistic system that is logically and geneti-

cally prior to its rational deployment. The mimetic theory of poetry is a disciplinary suppression of the emotional and nonrational public power of the linguistic code itself for the philosophical agenda, and it paves the way for banning poetry for the political agenda. Representations must be politically controlled, but before that, the power of the linguistic code itself must be discursively controlled, which is precisely what a mimetic theory of poetry ensures.⁴

Thus one is tempted to say that the attack on mimesis is something of a red herring. And it keeps on working. Even defenses of poetry remain within the framework of mimesis, representation, and “Truth”—although, of course, “Truth” keeps changing and Representation, for instance, can come to be the truth that poems represent. More important, the philosophical ban on linguistic emotion—a ban on the emotional power of language itself, which poetry focuses and intensifies—is also still at work. It has succeeded in keeping linguistic emotion out of the critical discourse on poetry by limiting our conception of poetic emotion to imitations, representations, or presentations of real-life emotions. Remarkably, there is no established critical vocabulary, theory, or methodology to engage the nature of specifically poetic emotion that draws on the rhetorical power of the affectively charged materials of language.

Such linguistic emotion and the relation it bears to the systematic formality of poetic language are among the questions that concern me in this study. Although I begin with Plato’s ban on poetry, my project does not belong to the genre of “pittiful defence[s] of poore Poetry.”⁵ I invoke Plato only because I attempt to think of poetic language outside a Platonic framework and account for poetic emotion without swerving to the grounds of mimesis, representation, and truth. I focus on lyric poetry, where an “I” talks to itself or to nobody in particular and is not primarily concerned with narrating a story or dramatizing an action. Without these other ends in view, the lyric presents us with poetic language *per se*, which is my subject.

Lyric poetry is not mimesis. Above everything else, it is a formal practice that keeps in view the linguistic code and the otherness of the material medium of language to all that humans do with it—refer, represent, express, narrate, imitate, communicate, think, reason, theorize, philosophize. It offers an experience of another kind of order, a system that operates independently of the production of the meaningful discourse that it enables. This is a mechanical system with its own rules, procedures, and history. It works with a kind of logic that is oblivious to discursive logic.

The nonrational order that the formality of poetic language keeps audible is distinct from any cultivated, induced, pathological, or “deviant” irrationality, or the irrationality of dreams and other comparable experiences, which certain poetic practices may invoke. Nor is it to be understood as some “primal” irrationality. Such “irrationals” implicitly affirm logical language as the norm, but precisely that norm is in question in the formality of poetic language *per se*, which is not oriented in relation to reference and rational discourse. It is simply

another “language,” another system of communication,⁶ and it commands power, for every speaker of a language emotionally responds to the language itself, even though complex ideas and figures may not be any more accessible to everyone than philosophical thought would be. The formal materiality of poetic language makes for its radically *popular* basis. And the more regular the patterns of the verse are, the more popular the verse. As Robert Frost puts it, the “spirit” of poetry is “safest in the keeping of the none too literate—people who know it by heart” (1968, 55).

Poetic language cannot be understood as deviating from or opposing a norm of rational language,⁷ because poetic forms clearly accommodate referential use of language and rational discourse. But they position most complex thought processes and rigorous figurative logic as figures on the ground of processes that are in no way rational. When poetry construes the symbolic function and logical operations as kinds of games one can play with language—right alongside wordplays and rhymes—all superstructures, all claims to extralinguistic “truths,” are in jeopardy. Poetry is a cultural institution dedicated to remembering and displaying the emotionally and historically charged materiality of language, on which logical discourse would establish its hold.⁸ It poses an ever-present danger for rational discourse, which must, for example, vigilantly guard against such poetic encroachments as alliterations or rhymes in “serious” prose. By contrast, in poetry words that carry the most import are highlighted as such by rhyming with other important words, by carrying more than one sense, or by where the beat falls. Poetry “argues” by appealing to the authority of the linguistic system, and poetic forms can host rational discourse, but not the other way around. While poetry ensures a constant alternation or pulse of sense and nonsense, rational discourse cannot afford to flash glimpses of the nonsensical, absurd, material base of the superstructure that it is.⁹ Reason needs to establish and maintain itself as what is “not nonrational.”

Thus one must not—if one wants to think poetry as such—posit an “unconscious” or “instincts” or any bodily “drives” to account for the power of poetry and its threat to rational discourse. Even if we were to recognize such entities, their relevance to poetry is highly questionable. Indeed, all such extralinguistic “irrationals” are historically and culturally specific disciplinary constructions of the “others” of disciplinary discourse, and they work only to confirm the priority of rational language. But poetry foregrounds a linguistic nonrational that is not a byproduct of reason; rather, it is the ground on which rational language and disciplinary discourses carve their territories, draw their borders, and designate their “irrational” others.

Just as the disciplinary state in the service of Truth must rule out and/or censor poetry, so must any disciplinary discourse in pursuit of truth, for the status of language is always at stake: it must remain a neutral, stable instrument of thought. Certainly, the thinkers who shaped modern disciplinary thought reg-

ister the threat of poetry. Marx, for example, started out with poetic ambitions but abandoned poetry for philosophy. Poetry was unsettling: “Everything real grew vague,” he writes his father in 1837, “and all that is vague lacks *boundaries*.” He decides to focus on “positive studies only”—“I burned all my poems”—and to demonstrate “our mental nature to be just as determined, concrete, and firmly established as our physical.”¹⁰ Freud started with hysteria and the dangerous contamination of language—the contagion of the body, affect, and the operations of the linguistic code—but he abandoned hysteria to establish his “science” of psychoanalysis. Saussure abandoned his fascinating early work on anagrammatically inscribed names in Saturnian funerary verse, which display the compulsions of language and jeopardize its status as an instrument of communication, in order to formulate a “science” of linguistics. In a sense, these disciplines implicitly draw the line at poetry as something that must be exorcised, displaced, or bracketed in order to establish their “territories,” carve out their “nation-states.” Disciplinary discourse inaugurates itself as “not poetry.” This rough outline, which would require another project to fill in, is meant only to point to the special, extradisciplinary status of poetic language and its fundamental challenge to any rational discourse in pursuit of truth.

Today poetry is largely ignored by literary studies because it forces the question of the category of the poetic as such, for poetry does not respond very well to current constructions of the “discipline” of literary study, which emphasize the social, economic, or political determinants of literary production. Literary production may be so determined, but critical approaches to poetry from these angles cannot tell us much about the nature and function of poetic language, which may be said to be the marker of the literary, the presumed object of literary study.¹¹ The form that the disciplinary censoring of lyric poetry takes today is a determined evasion of the special status of poetic language as such. Under the mandate to “historicize,” for example, the lyric reduces to a documentary of the inner experiences and private affairs of a bourgeois “individual.” The lyric is a foundational genre, and its history spans millennia;¹² it comprises a wide variety of practices, ranging in the West from Sappho to rap. “Historicizing” the lyric as essentially a late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European invention in effect universalizes a historically and geographically specific model of a subject.¹³ And the term “lyric,” still used in this sense, has come to serve as an ideological weapon in the ongoing politicized poetry wars. Whether the lyric is read as oppositional or complicitous, it is still understood to be the self-expression of a prior, private, constitutive subject.

Lyric language is a radically public language,¹⁴ but it will not submit to treatment as a social document—of a certain stage of capitalism, for example—because there is no “individual” in the lyric in any ordinary sense of the term. The lyric makes audible a virtual subjectivity in the shape of a given language, a mother tongue, and the historical permutations of the concept and status of an “individual” are not of help in understanding poetic subjectivity, which

will elude methodologies that assume that concept as a given—itself a Western bourgeois assumption.¹⁵ The emphasis on an extralinguistic “individual” is a historically specific form that the repression of the material and formal rhetoric of poetic language takes. For the subject represented *in* or *by* or *as* the poem’s referential language, the subject that is its fiction, is absolutely distinct from the subject produced and heard in the voice, rhythm, and sound shape of the poem.

In the form of a poem the prescriptive shape of the language itself becomes audible, and the “voice”—an individuating emotional inflection and rhythm, a voiceprint of a speaker—is heard in and as its manner of submission to the constraints of a prescriptive code. While the sorrows of the bourgeois “individual” may be a historically specific resonance of the lyric subject’s discourse of alienation, the alienation in poetic language is not specific to lyrics of bourgeois subjectivity: it is the enabling condition of subjectivity in language. The concept and status of an a priori “individual” are always already in question in a language that foregrounds the rules of the linguistic and formal codes; a subject is historically formulated in language precisely by subjection to a preexisting system that at once socializes and individuates it. Language produces the subject, not the other way around. The lyric “I” is a metaleptic figure, an Apollonian illusion of an “individual” projected upon, to use Nietzsche’s words, “a piece of fate” (1979, 54).

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