

## Lyric Dissent

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Let's start with the premise that the lyric is inherently social, that sociality is not a quality that can be separated from a category that is, by definition, so thoroughly bound up with the concept of voice. Much has been said about the lyric impulse as a cry of pain, something ineffable, unrepresentable, maybe even unrepresentable. But the social qualities of the lyric are effaced when conventional readings of voice predictably reveal what they sought all along: the maverick genius, the "strong," singular, unmediated self. As a result, critical discussions of the lyric have often overlooked renderings of voice that engage—or represent—a more complex or less immediately recognizable set of social structures, relations, or intentions.

An earlier version of this essay was delivered in the context of a panel entitled "The Social Lyric" at the "Dissenting Practices" conference held at Georgetown University in late February 2003, a month before the beginning of the war against Iraq. Organized by Mark Morris, the conference was a generationally defined follow-up to the 1992 poetry festival "Writing from the New Coast." Participants included Rod Smith, Lisa Jarnot, Myung Mi Kim, Peter Gizzi, Tracie Morris, Juliana Spahr, Jennifer Moxley, and many others.

But these larger questions of collective desires, subjectivities, and address are central to the kinds of contemporary lyric poetry that interest me, especially in the work of our generation. If the lyric's defining characteristic is the priority of its sonic patterns (rather than, say, its capacity for expressionism), then it depends on being heard; it hangs everything on the presence and engagement of its audience. Its articulations are in, with, to, and sometimes *for* a social context of which the writer is a part. Authorship need not be replaced entirely with readerly invention in order to acknowledge its grounding in collective enterprise. That is, in something literally and figuratively progressive, evolutionary.

Perhaps this is why the working definition of the lyric has been so confounding—and why it is so satisfying to find it represented in the context of dissent in general and dissenting poetic practices in particular. Rather than viewing the lyric's long tradition as an embodiment of tradition for tradition's sake, we can find within it the repeated reinvention of the present. The drive for generational identity entails a confrontation with the ways previous social formations have engaged in similar struggles, whether in the formulation of dissenting political beliefs or dissenting aesthetic practices.

In early 1920s America, when William Carlos Williams wrote that “the rose is obsolete,” he did not present this recognition as a singular subjective experience of disappointment or loss of value but as a transformative event of and beyond its moment, a shared event that is experienced within—and as—language. The rose may be obsolete as a trope of romance, but it is obsolete in the way that other manufactured things are—and before we know anything about the rose, we have to see it as a made thing, as artifice rather than as a “pure product” of Nature:

The rose is obsolete  
 but each petal ends in  
 an edge, the double facet  
 cementing the grooved  
 columns of air—The edge  
 cuts without cutting  
 meets—nothing—renews  
 itself in metal or porcelain

. . . . .

From the petal's edge a line starts  
 that being of steel

. . . . .

The fragility of the flower  
unbruised  
penetrates space.<sup>1</sup>

Here, in the midst of “Spring and All,” the garden is overtaken by the factory; the factory gone wild into the bedroom; the erotics of production suggestive of an abstract geometry and of a concrete war machine. Even *spring* is in quotation marks: a seasonal cue, a coiled mechanical force, or just a poet’s cast-off, “obsolete” miscellany. The poem is not a report on spring in New Jersey but a colloquial gesture toward what is so immediately evident it hardly needs to be mentioned, it being spring and all. The canonical literary rose is transformed by big American love, its unattached desire violently reinvented, its symbolic weight relined as a knife—all edges, metal or porcelain, literally cutting through the poem. What we experience is not a vertiginous descent or a soaring rise but the contrapuntal tension of opposing forces, the experience of resistance. It is “cold and precise”: a patterned dish dashed against unbounded “space,” a word machine that makes copper roses and steel roses. In the postwar stillness—and supposed prosperity—of the 1920s, the compressed power of the Old World’s rose explodes into American space like shrapnel.

Two decades later Williams rewrites “The Rose” in *The Wedge*:

The stillness of the rose  
in time of war  
reminds me of  
the long sleep just begun  
of that sparrow  
his head pillowed unroughed  
and unalarmed upon  
the polished pavement or  
of voluptuous hours  
with some  
breathless book when  
stillness was an eternity  
long since begun.<sup>2</sup>

1. William Carlos Williams, *Collected Poems I: 1909–1939* (New York: New Directions, 1986), 195–96.

2. William Carlos Williams, “The Rose,” in *Collected Poems II: 1939–1962* (New York: New Directions, 1988), 74–75. The earlier untitled poem beginning “The rose is obsolete” is

Almost a generation after Williams's "Spring," even another poem-about-a-rose is also a political poem: a "wedge" cut from *language*, a simple device thrown into yet another world war's elaborate, unseen machinery, a stoppage or "stillness" made perspectival, directing our attention to the dark contour between the monumental and the overlooked. Having fallen from its abstracted plane, the rose becomes a sparrow, a token of its own fallenness. As if to contradict the active, almost breathless lineation of the poem, "stillness" moves toward "stillness," space translated into time through the most common means imaginable: a sparrow, a rose. Not new vorticist roses but the rose stilled by war; not eagle, not lark, not nightingale but the sparrow whose descent unnoticed onto the sidewalk is itself like a book whose primary actions have already occurred and are thus outside the frame of the "breathless" halted present. Such actions and their confessional weight, their self-assured notoriety, are beyond the concerns of the poet who stops to consider the detritus of the sidewalk, who places at the center of our minds an "obsolete" trope that is so immediately before us, so close to cliché that it seems almost not to reside in the realm of modern poetry at all.

Another decade later, in *Journey to Love*, that dead sparrow is still decomposing, its poetic problem still being worked out:

Practical to the end,  
           it is the poem  
                           of his existence  
 that triumphed  
           finally;  
                           a wisp of feathers  
 . . . . .  
 an effigy of a sparrow,  
           a dried wafer only,  
                           left to say  
 and it says it  
           without offense,  
                           beautifully;  
 This was I,  
           a sparrow.

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also titled "The Rose" in Williams's *Selected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1985), 44–45.

I did my best;  
farewell.<sup>3</sup>

When William Blake wrote that “a tear is an intellectual thing,” I don’t think he imagined a twenty-first-century academy enduringly committed to a confessional model of poetic production but something like the kind of human, emotional—I don’t mean sentimental—wager that Williams poses both in ideas *and* in things.

As I reread the moderns in the context of our current political situation, I am struck by the palpable presence of war in so much of their poetry and prose—especially in Williams and Wallace Stevens. While it’s rarely treated head-on, it permeates—or, like the rose in “Spring and All,” “penetrates”—the “space” of their pages. And it—this ongoing war—persists like a shadow in our own pictures of the work at hand.

Stevens wrote that “the imagination and society are inseparable,” that there is “a violence from within that protects us from a violence without” and that “the expression of it, the sound of its words, helps us to live our lives.”<sup>4</sup> Even a writer who seems to be as aesthetically—rather than overtly politically—driven as Gertrude Stein comments that “each of us in our own way are bound to express what the world in which we are living is doing.”<sup>5</sup> So now, even when we are not singing protests, we are “bound to express” the confounding music of our time. In it—by which I mean in our poems—I can hear that some of us are blogging, and some of us are marching. Some of us are organizing, some of us are writing letters to the editor, some of us are assembling events that allow us to see each other again so that we might despair less than we are prone to, and the sound we make is composed of all these things.

Some of us are, as Stein put it, talking and listening at the same time, and some of us are looking for a way of breaking into some other form. Some of us are teaching because we believe in the possibilities of a social contract even more than we doubt the viability of academic institutions. Some of us are here because these are rooms for talking and listening at the same time, which is a way of understanding and owning up to

3. William Carlos Williams, “The Sparrow (To My Father),” in *Journey to Love* (New York: Random House, 1955), 10–15.

4. Wallace Stevens, “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” in *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York: Knopf, 1951), 28, 36.

5. Gertrude Stein, “Portraits and Repetition,” in *Lectures in America* (New York: Random House, 1935), 177.

our desire to be with others in the poems we love, especially when those poems become the vehicles for an understanding of the world beyond the market, and we are afraid that if we do not share our love for these poems they will die from inattention or be burned.

Some of us go to work in rooms like this one because we believe that utopia flashes into being through the words of a conversation, that it is unfixed and moving, that this movement is not finished, that a poem is not the end of something, and that who we are is not an improvement over what we call the past in any way that we can know it or own it.

In the troubled obsolescence of so much of what we love and what we do, the page is like this room. I love being here with you in the heat of what you know. I would like to hold this moment in my mind as if it were a picture. Gertrude Stein said she learned that to make a portrait you have to ask a question. "How do you like what you have. This is a question that anybody can ask anybody. Ask it."<sup>6</sup> So I want to ask all of you: how do you like what you have?

This is a picture of who we are.

6. Stein, "Portraits and Repetition," 171.