



Editor's Introduction

Author(s): Roland Bleiker

Source: *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, Vol. 25, No. 3, Poetic World Politics (July-Sept. 2000), pp. 269-284

Published by: [Sage Publications, Inc.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40644949>

Accessed: 21/03/2014 00:34

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Editor's Introduction

Roland Bleiker*

Perhaps the immobility of the things around us is imposed on them by our certitude that they are themselves and nothing else, by the immobility of our thinking about them.

—Marcel Proust¹

How can you hear me? I am speaking from so far away.

—René Char²

Most prevailing approaches to the study of world politics pay little attention to issues of language. Words are treated as mere tools to represent factual events that have qualities of their own, qualities that are said to exist independently of how we perceive them through human eyes and human speech. The articles that follow problematize this assumption. They draw upon the poetic imagination to reveal how language and social life are intrinsically linked, how more inclusive ways of theorizing and conducting world politics may emerge from engaging the linguistic habits through which some of our most pressing dilemmas have become objectified. Such an endeavor is as unusual as it is urgently needed, for the academic discipline of international relations, as Philip Darby reminds us, has never had “the assurance to reach out and allow the subjectivity of fiction to disturb its stable structures.”³

The texts that make up this special issue span a wide range of topics, from terrorism to diplomacy, from war to democracy, from colonialism to peasant resistance. They are structured in reference to three distinct yet overlapping themes: security, development, and authority. Each section contains both essays and poems that illuminate the issues in question from different angles. The respective texts are cross-cultural and multidisciplinary. Voices emanate from Asia, Africa, Australia, Europe, and the Americas. Preliminary remarks cannot

*Co-Director, Rotary Centre for International Studies in Peace and Conflict Resolution, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Qld. 4072, Australia. E-mail: Bleiker@mailbox.uq.edu.au

possibly represent or even summarize the contents of such a polyphony. It is up to each individual voice to reveal how the process of transgressing linguistic boundaries may engender practical and politically relevant forms of insight. This is why the purpose of the present introduction is limited to providing a conceptual map with which the subsequent poetic texts can be read and recognized as central aspects of international relations. Accessible prose is essential to this endeavor, but not enough. The reader, too, has responsibilities. She must bring as much openness, patience, and trust as possible to an endeavor that consists, in essence, of acquiring a novel set of lenses to (re)view the realities of contemporary world politics.

Language and World Politics

To scrutinize the role of language in world politics is not simply to examine the clash of values between different national languages. Interactions between them, as for instance in translating activities at diplomatic summits, is of course a central aspect of international relations. But the political struggle over language also occurs in an array of other, far more subtle, and, indeed, far-reaching domains. Consider how a key event in world politics, such as the fall of the Berlin Wall, can be represented through different types of speech, each of which embodies a subjective but discursively objectified way of looking at the world. The turbulent events of 1989 can, for instance, be understood through the vocabulary of high politics, which revolves around great power relations and diplomatic negotiations; or through the vocabulary of strategic studies, which stresses military capacities, state repression, and relations of coercive force; or through the vocabulary of international political economy, which places emphasis on market performances and their impact on political stability; or through the vocabulary of peace studies, which focuses on popular dissent and its ability to uproot systems of domination; or through the vocabulary of feminist theory, which illuminates the gendered dimensions of crumbling walls; or through the vocabulary of the common men and women in the street, which epitomizes the daily frustrations of living in a suffocating society; or through any other vocabulary that expresses the subjective dimensions of interpreting events. In each case, though, the specific vocabulary that is used embodies and objectifies a particular, discursively embedded worldview—one that is inherently political, even though it presents its viewpoints, often convincingly, as unbiased representations of the real.⁴

A successful rethinking of world politics, a search for a more peaceful and just international order, must deal with issues of representation. It must engage the languages through which we have come to distinguish the safe from the threatening, the rational from the irrational, the possible from the impossible. Needed is a critique of language that opens up possibilities to gaze beyond the givenness of world politics, that can problematize political dilemmas that have been rendered unproblematic, even invisible, through years of normalizing speech and corresponding political practices. Needed is what Fiona Sampson demands in her poem "History Train"; namely, "something more substantial than / sliding stations, names broken into / letters that don't arrive / properly on the tongue" (p. 285).

Poetry is ideally suited for rethinking world politics because it revolves around a recognition that (aesthetic) form and (political) substance cannot be separated. The manner in which a text is written, a speech is uttered, a thought is thought, is integral to its content. There is no neutral way of representing the world, a form that is somehow detached from the linguistic and social practices in which the speaker or writer is embedded. "The Indian language had its own . . . referents, its own cultural markers," notes Nicholas Higgins (p. 364) when describing the initial contacts between the *mestizo* Zapatistas and their indigenous counterparts in the Chiapas Mountains of Mexico. Understanding these differences was more than simply an issue of translation. It had to do with appreciating and legitimizing cultural values, and it led, at least for Subcomandante Marcos and some of the other mestizos, to a fundamental rethinking of politics. The fact that the Zapatista rebels decided to release their press communiqués in poetic form was no coincidence. Indeed, the choice was both highly conscious and highly political, having to do with the issue of "how, and by whom, the realm of experience can best be communicated" (p. 360). It is in this sense that poetry lies at the heart of politics and social change, for it deals with the values that either enable or obstruct transformation.

The essence of poetry is thus not to be found primarily in its formal aspects, such as rhyme or line breaks. The key, rather, lies in the self-consciousness with which a poem engages the links between language and sociopolitical reality. In its broadest meaning, the poetic refers, as Paul Valéry suggests, to all compositions in which language is means and substance at the same time.⁵ Look, for instance, at Stephen Chan's poem "Body Count in Natal" (pp. 323–328). It seeks to convey impressions and emotions linked to social and political struggles in South Africa. Crucial to the poem's message is that the insight it reveals cannot simply be translated

into straightforward prose. The manner in which the poem speaks is an essential element of what it says. Language is not merely a means to an end. It merges into an inseparable unity of substance and form. Language, then, is recognized as being part of the material realm—as constituting a form of action in its own right. “Words are not just narrative material,” Costas M. Constantinou stresses, “but can themselves have stories to tell” (p. 289). This is why any definition of poetry that tries to be more specific than drawing attention to the importance of form runs the risk of failing to appreciate the very power that poetry may be able to unleash. Indeed, it is precisely this fluidity, the stylistic refusal to accept what is, that sets poetry apart from other forms of writing.

The purpose of this introduction now is to identify and explore several ways through which the form of poetry can turn into political substance.

The Potential and Limits of Activist Poetry

The first and most evident political dimension of form can be found in activist poetry; that is, in those instances when poets interfere directly with specific social struggles. These poets and their texts epitomize a certain type of activist, one that is situated, as Roland Barthes notes, “halfway between militant and writer,” taking from the former the commitment to act and from the latter the knowledge that the process of writing constitutes such an act.⁶ The essays by Nicholas Higgins and Paul Routledge (pp. 359–389) document the role of such poetry. The former analyzes the poetic dimensions of the Zapatista struggle against the neoliberal government agenda of the Mexican state, while the latter draws attention to the role of poetry in a local Indian struggle against the deployment of a national missile base. Both highlight the extent to which poetry can be used as a highly effective political tool.

But activist poetry is not unproblematic. Most so-called war poems, for instance, are neither very political nor very poetic. They often are either short-lived battle cries or expressions of agony that reflect, despite their urgent subject matter, above all personal testimonies. If a poem is to be of both poetic and political value, it has to transgress, as James Scully emphasizes, the “boundaries between private and public, self and other.”⁷ Take the example of Pablo Neruda, who at one stage of his life navigated, as a Chilean diplomat, through the lofty altitudes of high politics. He called for an engaged poetry, one that speaks not only of love and

beauty, but that is also permeated with a profound concern for social justice, for the impurity of the human condition. His commitment to an engaged poetry emerged in the mid-1930s, when a diplomatic reassignment brought him to Spain, where he experienced the onset of the civil war. Although Neruda did not hesitate to commit his poetry to the republican cause, he was well aware that this was a problematic move—one that needed to be justified very carefully:

Would you know why his poems
never mention the soil or the leaves,
the gigantic volcanoes of the country that bore him?

Come see the blood in the streets,
come see
the blood in the streets,
come see the blood
in the streets!⁸

Neruda's need to defend an engaged poetry epitomizes a larger debate that is waged about the political dimensions of poetry—a debate that is taken on in various ways by the contributors to this volume. What makes poetry political? There are those, like Neruda, who take sides in conflicts and use poetry as a weapon to pursue a political objective. At the other end of the spectrum are those, like the German poet Hans Magnus Enzensberger, who see the political dimensions of poetry precisely in a detachment from short-term purposes of agitation. The political task of a poem then is “to refuse any political task and to speak for everyone, even when it speaks of no one, of a tree, a stone, of that which is not.”⁹ Rather than representing a single and uniform position, the contributors to this issue illustrate the wide range of discussions that are waged around this difficult issue. That is, indeed, one of the main points: that an adequate understanding of the international can emerge only from an acceptance of difference, from the recognition that the world can—and must—be seen from more than one viewpoint. And yet, while locating the political power of poetry in different spaces and disagreeing on the mechanisms through which capacities for transformation are unleashed, all contributors deal in one way or another with the style that sets poetry apart from other forms of speaking and writing. All draw upon the poetic imagination to challenge some of the immobilities that have come to characterize the theory and practice of world politics.

Redescribing World Political Realities

A second set of inquiries locates the political dimension of poetry not in a direct form of engagement, but in the search for a language that permits a more inclusive approach to world politics. The strength of this poetry emerges from the ability to reveal what had been eclipsed by the dominant language of international relations. “There is always the chance,” says Ernest Hemingway, that “a book of fiction may throw some light on what has been written as fact.”¹⁰

Consider the work of the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova. She lived through and sought to capture poetically most of her country’s troublesome twentieth century. One of her best-known poems, “Requiem,” describes the so-called Great Terror, the period that is usually considered to be the worst moment of Stalin’s authoritarian rule. Akhmatova poetically recalls a question asked by a bluish-lipped woman standing behind her in the prison lines of Leningrad:

“Can you describe this?”
 And I answered: “Yes, I can.”
 Then something that looked like a smile passed over
 what had once been her face.¹¹

Much like Akhmatova was trying to find words for events that were too terrible to be expressed or apprehended through the existing language, the contributors to this issue seek to provide us with different languages to understand the realities of contemporary world politics. Look at the texts in the section on security. The poems by Stephen Chan, Necati Polat, and Karl-Erik Paasonen all seek to validate political perspectives that have been pushed to the margins by more prevalent accounts of events. Paasonen, for instance, allows us to experience poetically some of the most tragic moments of the Gulf War—moments that simply could not be seen through the sanitized representations of the events in the Western media. He speaks of Kerbala in ruins, of “Eight districts in ten destroyed like / Two hands with eight fingers hammered to crushed bones” (p. 329). Parallel to the poems, the articles by Costas Constantinou and Anthony Burke problematize our understanding of security. Constantinou speaks of “synchronizing security, safety, and certitude” (p. 288), and Burke draws attention to the double-edged aspects of security politics: “while it promises safety, to ward off death, it generates fear and reposes upon death” (p. 316). Both

Constantinou and Burke then resort to poetry in an attempt to validate a different notion of security, one that points not to an escape from danger, but to a “passage *through* fear and loss” (p. 308), one that allows us to feel “secure-in-danger . . . and dwell next to one’s enemy . . . in security, without surrendering, or dominating, or making the foe friend” (p. 290). The task ahead is daring, to say the least. But elusive as the final objective may be, the challenge cannot and must not be evaded: “Can you be peaceful / even where there is no peace?” asks Jaan Kaplinski. “Answers / are few, as always” (p. 412).

The texts gathered in the section on development challenge conventional representations in a similarly radical way. Sekai Nzenza-Shand poetically brings to life the colonial impositions of time in a way that a detached analysis hardly could. Subhash Jaireth reminds us of the original colonial encounters and their violent legacies, with which we still struggle today. Both of these poetic accounts may best be read in conjunction with Christine Sylvester’s article. In a textual strategy that takes the form of a prose poem, she employs a variety of poetic devices, including irony, in an attempt to unsettle the stable and often unproblematized topic of development. The concept of grass roots, for instance, is then no longer associated with self-effacing alternative development workers operating in the democratic realm of civil society, but also with a “shrine of authenticity to which one treks” (p. 340). We hear of subconscious nostalgia for Western suburban grass—sturdy grass that is “mowed, chopped, and trimmed” but fragile at the same time, grass that “loses a constant battle against greenery constituted as ‘unsightly weeds’” (p. 340). The following is from Ross Coggins’s poem “The Development Set”:

The Development Set is bright and noble,
Our thoughts are deep and our vision global;
Although we move with the better classes,
Our thoughts are always with the masses.

We discuss malnutrition over steaks
And plan hunger talks during coffee breaks.
Whether Asian floods or African drought,
We face each issue with an open mouth.¹²

Irony shatters the positivist unity of subject and object. It becomes a metaphor that problematizes the link between the representation and that which is represented, for irony always refers to

something other than what is literally expressed. It refuses to identify an object by its name or face value. Ironic writing does not expect the world to be smooth. It does not anticipate that all of our observations neatly fit into preconceived and clearly delineated conceptual boxes. Rather, complex occurrences and even inconsistencies and contradictions are accepted as inevitable aspects of our effort to make sense of social phenomena. Irony draws attention to the fact that representation is an inevitably political issue, that there is always a gap between what is observed and how this observation is represented in and through language. Richard Rorty says the ironist is a person who has doubts about the vocabulary that is currently used, but is also aware of two additional insights: that no argument phrased in the present language can sustain or dissolve these doubts, and that there is no other, alternative vocabulary that can ever be final in the sense that it would be able to grasp an essence of things.¹³ By drawing attention to the inevitably incomplete and inherently political aspects of representation, irony can make room for alternative visions and for political practices that may emerge out of this newly created thinking space. The claims of grassroots movements, for instance, are then viewed in a way that allows us to recognize the problematic and contradictory aspects of Western development practices.

The poetic quest for inclusion does not bring certitude. Quite to the contrary, it removes immobilizing certitudes about the international and thus reveals the gray shades of world politics—its complexities and paradoxes. “In order to be clear to contemporaries / A poet flings everything wide,” Akhmatova says.¹⁴ And by flinging things wide, the poetic image has the potential to bring into a dialogical realm many of the repressed voices, perspectives, and emotions that otherwise may never reach the prose-oriented theorists and practitioners of contemporary world politics. The point, then, is not to press for more definitional clarity, but to explore the contexts within which the poetic imagination turns into a political practice. This is why Sylvester wants us to “write with less certainty the cookbooks of development” (p. 347). This is why Constantinou recognizes in the false promise of certitude the very source of danger, advising us to live with vibrations that “desynchronize security from safety and certitude” (p. 303). This is why Burke knows that however “smooth” the promise of perfect security may be, it “binds us to the *jagged*.” He, too, has no poetic certitude to offer, no ready-made solution, only a “path to a reimagination of whatever discourses seduce and ensnare us” (p. 316–317). And this is why Kaplinski knows that “God has left us: I felt this clearly / loosening the earth around a rhubarb plant” (p. 413).

The Poetic Search for Perspective and Voice

Directly linked to the previous discussion, another political aspect of poetry has to do with the search for inclusion and dialogue. But instead of presenting old dilemmas in new ways, these poetic subversions seek to stretch the scope of world politics. The task, then, is to visualize politics beyond the blood in the street, to move away from an understanding of international relations that has almost exclusively revolved around the systematic study of issues such as war, diplomacy, trade, and major revolutions. A poetic distancing from high politics, heroic deeds, and the abstractions of rational decision makers locates the international in spaces that have been eclipsed by the languages that are usually employed to make sense of world politics. The focus then lies, for example, with mundane and daily occurrences that shape the international in a powerful way, but do not attract attention as much as high politics and violent conflicts do.

Various poems and essays in this special issue validate the local and the daily as crucial aspects of world politics. Nzenza-Shand's story about everyday life in Zimbabwe, for instance, highlights how much seemingly apolitical and neutral concepts, such as the idea of time, are in fact highly political instruments of colonization. Nzenza-Shand perfectly illustrates what Arturo Escobar envisages with his concept of postdevelopment; that is, a kind of understanding that refuses to reproduce Western ways of knowing and, instead, validates the logic of place-based cultures and communities in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.¹⁵ Routledge, too, engages this issue in his account of local resistance against the Indian government's attempt to build a missile base in Baliapal. Songs that played a central role in the resistance struggle, he stresses, "evoked the economic and cultural particularities of the place, whose population was opposed to the abstractions of space inherent in state-security discourse" (p. 386). In a Western context, too, the local needs to be reintroduced in an effort to resist the encroaching tendencies of universalized norms. My own article in this special issue, for instance, seeks to reveal how, in the context of Cold War East German politics, poetry became a way of describing the undersides of daily life: the urban and industrial wastelands that had no place in the vocabulary of the official ideological discourse.

The process of poetically validating the local and the daily can be highly political, for it may shatter the artificial unity of an established and linguistically objectified way of looking at the world. By naming the reality of everyday life in East Germany, for instance, a poem turned into a local form of resistance not only

against the existing political regime, but also against the spatial delineation of Cold War international politics. In a similar vein, the Zapatistas' attempt to foreground local Indian culture in the face of a universal neoliberal market rationale did, in essence, "disrupt and disturb the government's monopoly on truth and fact" (p. 360). And in Baliapal, the poetic celebration of local life challenged "state-centered discourses concerning the enactment of politics and development" (p. 387).

The search for inclusion is, of course, never complete. There will never be a language that does not exclude, that can safeguard the pluralities of life and provide dialogical means that can solve the problems of world politics to the satisfaction of all. Routledge's essay, for instance, demonstrates that while successfully challenging the government's attempt to build a missile base, the discourse of resistance in Baliapal also effaced crucial local differences and inequalities, having to do with gender, caste, and class. Hence, the only defense against a complacent entrenchment of political dilemmas and tragedies is a constant process of disturbing meaning, of searching for words that name silences and that challenge immobilizing certitudes. One by one, invisible and inaudible, up-turned words emerge and advance. This is why a poet's failure to solve a political problem cannot be held against her or against the evaluation of the long-term significance of poetic insight.

Poetry as Critical Historical Memory

The fourth, but not necessarily last, function of poetry, is that of a historical memory. Poems can preserve, for subsequent generations, the multiple dimensions of historical events. Says Akhmatova: "I – am your voice, the warmth of your breath, / I – am the reflection of your face."¹⁶ Writing in July 1914, at a time when uncritical euphoria took hold of a war-thirsty Europe, she both anticipates and already records the tragedy that was soon to engulf the entire continent:

Fearful times are drawing near. Soon
Fresh graves will be everywhere.
There will be famine, earthquakes, widespread death,
And the eclipse of the sun and the moon.¹⁷

Memory is perhaps the oldest function of poetry. It is no accident that poetry began as a form of speaking that revolved around rhyme and other regularities. The rhythmic and rhyming elements

of a poem made it easy to remember. Poetry thus came to fulfill the function of a societal memory. It was used to hand down from generation to generation the wisdom that had accumulated over time. Poems transmitted and inscribed into cultural traditions the insights that had emerged from specific historical struggles. Rhyme was essential because it maximized both the likelihood of remembrance and the adequacy of memory. This stylistic component of poetry was to remain essential until the widespread use of paper and printing created new possibilities for the collective retention of facts and data. Free verse, the prevalent form of poetry today, was able to emerge only because the function of remembering could be consigned, as Scully emphasizes, to a variety of alternative memory banks, from conventional books to their latest electronic extensions. "With increasing dependence on such repositories, and with less individual need to remember, free verse becomes possible and even, perhaps, inevitable."¹⁸

The poem functions as memory long after the inevitable rupture between a text and its author. Akhmatova, for instance, knew that the historical events and emotions she was poetically recording had meaning beyond her physical existence: "And if they gag my exhausted mouth / Through which a hundred million scream, / Then may the people remember me / On the eve of my remembrance day."¹⁹ Other poets too—Osip Mandelstam, Alexander Blok, Vladimir Majakovsky, Boris Pasternak, Joseph Brodsky, among them—have left us with a poetic record of contemporary Russia. Likewise, our knowledge of this country's previous century has primarily been conveyed through fiction. Consider how Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Pushkin, and Gogol have told the world far more about social and political life in nineteenth-century Russia than all history books taken together. It is through the voices of Anna Karenina, Count Wronskij, Raskolnikov, Evgenii Onegin, and the brothers Karamazov that the values and struggles of an epoch have been conveyed to subsequent generations. This is not only the case because these accounts are read (and the film versions are viewed) far more than meticulously researched history books. A poetic rendering of an event or epoch is also able to deal more adequately with the gap that opens up between the event in question and its representation through language. Poetry recognizes that this inevitable gap is the place where politics and the struggle for power take place. The poem engages this struggle, but instead of taking sides it seeks to appreciate and save from historical annihilation the multiplicities that make up political and social life. In this sense, the poem becomes a critical historical memory, one that retains for future generations a variety of voices and realities. Such a

validation of difference can be achieved only if the poet does not repress or ignore representation, if she seeks to deal with its political functions, with the inherently problematic nature of rendering meaningful that which often has no meaning for those who live in and through it.²⁰

Whether or not the poems represented and discussed in this special issue will turn into historical memories does, of course, depend on the extent to which they are able to enter the public sphere. This issue is for history itself to decide. All that the poet can do for now is to give testimony: faithfully, ironically, polyphonically. Says Jaireth in his poetic account of Alfonso de Albuquerque's bloody arrival in Goa: "In that tropical dark night, / I, the passionate scribe, honestly recorded" (p. 357). It is in this spirit that the Korean poet Ko Un (pp. 409–410) has sought to document the often forgotten factual and emotional aspects linked to Korean citizens who were either killed or forcefully relocated to foreign territories during the Japanese colonial occupation. "Sixty years have passed, a second and third generation," and a young boy in far-off Alma Ata picks up his balalaika and plays the Korean folk song *Arirang*. It is as if the sorrows of his ancestors had come alive in this symbolic and emotional tune. "Is it blood or music, I wonder."

Writing Poetic World Politics

If form is indeed the essence of poetry, then the problem arises of how to talk about it. Because style is what sets poetry apart from other forms of writing, one cannot simply translate the meaning of poetry into prose, explain its significance to world politics in a language familiar to our daily forms of verbal interaction. How can poetics, the study of poetry, possibly do justice to its object of inquiry?

To speak of a poem, Martin Heidegger warns, is to judge from the outside what a poem is. No position, no insight can ever justify such a presumptuous approach.²¹ This is why Paul Celan, when asked to explain the meaning of his poems, often replied: "Read! Just keep reading. Understanding comes of itself."²² The point, then, is not to drown poetry in an ocean of explanatory prose, but to let a poem speak, to accept its authority and listen to the political message that is hidden in its core. This is why this special issue contains not only essays about poetics, but also poems: single and unexplained messages, attempts to engage world politics in their own stylistic way.

But the problem of speaking about poetry cannot be solved by poems alone. No poem can ever represent or even illustrate what

poetry is all about. Because the poem strives for openness it refuses to speak of and for a totality. Because the poem searches for cracks in hegemonies, voices that have gone unnoticed, it is an instant of subversive particularity. Celan explains in one of his rare excursions from poetry into poetics: "But I am speaking of poetry that does not exist! The absolute poem—no, it certainly does not exist, it cannot exist!"²³ Heidegger, likewise, explains that "no single poem, not even all of them taken together, can tell everything."²⁴ Poetry deals with the particular, but it is not primarily about this or that argument, this or that idea. It is about searching for a language that provides us with different eyes, different ways of perceiving what we already know. It is about unsettling, about making strange that which is familiar to us, about opening up thinking space and creating possibilities to act in more inclusive ways. No poem, no isolated citation can ever do justice to this objective. Only an extended reading of poetry can succeed in stretching the boundaries of our minds.

What are we, as students of world politics, left with if poetry cannot be explained in prose and if there is no absolute poem either—one that could represent and illuminate the power of poetry? We must attempt the impossible task of speaking about the unspeakable. Heidegger has some ideas about how to tackle this difficult puzzle. For him, a poem surrounded by the noise of unpoetic language is like a bell hanging freely outside. Even the slightest snowfall would throw it out of tune. Each comment on a poem, he frets, may well do nothing but cast snow onto the bell. But because there is no absolute poem, we must still look for a way to talk about poetry, a way that swirls up as little snow as possible. What we must aim for, Heidegger suggests, is a form of comment that renders itself obsolete once it is spoken—a form of comment that explains but then defers authority back to the poem.²⁵ To search for this formless form is the principle methodological challenge of the articles in this special issue. The poems will do the rest.

Reading Poetic World Politics

Just as intricate as representing poetry is the task of reading poems. It requires a certain amount of effort, especially if one is to explore a poem's political dimensions. Poetry alludes, rather than explains. It shows, rather than argues. It must "leave traces of [its] passage, not proofs. Only traces bring about dreams," says René Char.²⁶ This is why, for instance, the Zapatistas' poetic struggle against the overwhelming prevalence of neoliberal governmental rationales is "not

directed to the head,” as Higgins stresses, but aims for “the heart, the part most forgotten” (p. 371). Roberta Reeder, one of Akhmatova’s biographers, perfectly captures this political aspect of poetry:

Poetic prose mirrors the way memory works. A story is based on analogy and association rather than on temporal or cause-effect relationships. There is a simultaneity and bringing into juxtaposition of key related moments of the past in order to give them new meaning within new context, and these fragments become equivalent in relevance.²⁷

A poem plays with the imagination; it presupposes an active reader, one that produces meaning herself. To take a well-known example: George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* is a book that contains few if any lines that are explicitly political. And yet, it may be difficult to find a more direct critique of Communist totalitarianism. “All animals are equal, but some are more equal than others” is a poetic line that may have had a greater political impact than any of the numerous texts that sought to critique Stalinism in more realistic ways. But a poetic line can become politically relevant only with the help of a reader—someone who recognizes and validates a metaphor. It is the reader, and the reader only, who establishes a poem’s political significance—who brings to the fore the struggle that takes place between the tension of what is and how this *is* is represented in and through language.

Perhaps the task of reading poetry politically is most akin to gazing at a painting. Both of these forms of expression have important aspects in common. They assume, to repeat an earlier mentioned theme, what F. R. Ankersmit calls the “brokenness” of political reality: the fact that there will always be a discrepancy between the represented and its representation.²⁸ The writer, much like the painter, portrays the object through a particular media of representation. Even a perfectly naturalistic painting is still a form of representation. It cannot capture the essence of its object. It is painted from a certain angle, at a certain time of the day, and in a certain light. The materials are those chosen by the artist, as are the colors and size of the painting, even its frame. Likewise, no social scientist can represent a political issue independently of the materials chosen for this task. Even the most thorough empirical analysis cannot depict its object of inquiry in an authentic way. It, too, reflects color choices, brush strokes, framing. It, too, remains a form of interpretation, and with that an inherently political exercise.

From a poetic perspective, the key is not to reduce or even ignore the inevitable gap between the represented and its representation. To do so is not only naive, but also highly problematic, for

it represses the political dimensions inherent in all forms of representation. The point, then, is not to search for photographic precision when addressing an entrenched political issue. Rather, the main task consists of dealing with political dilemmas that are entailed in the very act of representing. This is why a poet repaints an object in different colors and from different angles, again and again, thereby revealing the familiar in new ways. Neruda was always puzzled when asked about what kind of book he was currently working on. "My books are always about the same thing," he said. "I always write the same book."²⁹ It is in the reworking of political reality that transformative potential is hidden. Poetic rerepresentations thus can, much like a Picasso canvas, open our eyes and minds to different ways of seeing what we have already taken for granted. Hence the plea that the authors in this special issue address to their readers: to take seriously a domain of inquiry that can, if valorized properly, help us deal with some of today's most pressing political challenges.

Notes

Several poems and essays in this special issue were presented at the Annual Convention of the International Studies Association, Los Angeles, March 2000. I am particularly grateful to Rob Walker for his trust in and support of the idea of poetically rethinking world politics. Thanks, too, for a variety of contributions, to Tim Dunne, Jef Huysmans, Subhash Jaireth, Paul Patton, Fiona Sampson, Johanna Sutherland, and Christine Sylvester.

All page numbers indicated in the text of this introduction refer to the articles that appear in this special issue. Due to space constraints we are unfortunately not able to reproduce the original texts of translated poems.

1. Marcel Proust, *Du côté de chez Swann*, vol. 1 of *A la recherche du temps perdu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), p. 12.

2. René Char, *Fureur et mystère* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), p. 109.

3. Philip Darby, *The Fiction of Imperialism: Reading between International Relations and Postcolonialism* (London: Cassell, 1998), p. 19.

4. For a more elaborate illustration of this issue, both in the context of the collapsed Berlin Wall and in a more general theoretical sense, see my *Popular Dissent, Human Agency, and Global Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), esp. chapters 4–6.

5. Paul Valéry, *Variété V* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), p. 291.

6. Roland Barthes, *Le degré zero de l'écriture* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1972), p. 23.

7. James Scully, *Line Break: Poetry as Social Practice* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988), p. 5.

8. Neruda, "Explico Algunas Cosas," trans. B. Belitt, in *Pablo Neruda: Five Decades* (New York: Grove, 1974), pp. 56–57.

9. Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *Poesie und Politik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1987 [1962]), p. 135. For an elaboration on the issue, see my "Give

It the Shade: Paul Celan and the Politics of Apolitical Poetry," in *Political Studies* 47 (1999): 661–676.

10. Ernest Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), p. 1.

11. Anna Akhmatova, "Requiem," in *The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova*, trans. J. Herschmeyer (Boston: Zephyr, 1997), p. 384.

12. Ross Coggins, "The Development Set," in Graham Hancock, *Lords of Poverty: The Power, Prestige, and Corruption of the International Aid Business* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1989), p. i.

13. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 73–76.

14. Akhmatova, "The Reader," in *Complete Poems*, note 11, p. 415.

15. Arthuro Escobar and Ho-Won Jeong, "Postdevelopment: Beyond the Critique of Development," in *The New Agenda for Peace Research*, ed. Ho-Won Jeong (Brookfield, Ver: Ashgate, 1999), p. 223.

16. Akhmatova, "To the Many," in *Complete Poems*, note 11, p. 299.

17. Akhmatova, "July 1914," *ibid.*, p. 199.

18. Scully, note 7, pp. 126–127.

19. Akhmatova, note 11, p. 393.

20. For a more detailed analysis of this theme, see my "Pablo Neruda and the Struggle for Political Memory," in *Third World Quarterly* 20, no. 6 (1999): 1129–1142.

21. Martin Heidegger, *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1981), p. 182.

22. Celan cited in Israel Chalfen, *Paul Celan*, trans. M. Bleyleben (New York: Persea Books, 1991 [1979]), p. xi.

23. Paul Celan, "Der Meridian," in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 3 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986 [1958]), p. 199.

24. Heidegger, "Die Sprache im Gedicht," in *Unterwegs zur Sprache* (Stuttgart: Günter Neske, 1959 [1953]), pp. 37–38.

25. Heidegger, note 21, p. 194.

26. René Char, *La bibliothèque est en feu*, in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Galimard, 1983), p. 382.

27. Roberta Reeder, *Anna Akhmatova: Poet and Prophet* (New York: Picador, 1994), p. 386.

28. F. R. Ankersmit, *Aesthetic Politics: Political Philosophy Beyond Fact and Value* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), esp. pp. 21–63.

29. Neruda, *Memoirs* (London: Penguin, 1978), p. 298.