

FORMAL PROTESTS

James Matthew Wilson

**QUESTIONS OF POSSIBILITY:
CONTEMPORARY POETRY
AND POETIC FORM**

David Caplan

Oxford University Press

<http://www.oup.com>

165 pages; paper, \$24.95

Contemporary literary scholarship has, by and large, impaled itself on the paired horns of an equivocation on the word “politics,” and this has damaged the study of poetry in particular. Taking to heart the lessons of poststructural thinkers, foremost among them, Michel Foucault, most scholars accept that the very structures of culture and subjectivity are constituted by and within a potentially infinite series of power relationships. As such, every facet of experience merits analysis to expose these lines of political tension or domination. One fruit of this has been to open up discursive space for works previously marginalized for their lack of high cultural resonance or aesthetic achievement. Where once *Dracula* (1897) was a kind of pulp fiction, it now occupies a central place in the ever-proliferating syllabi of graduate courses on the gothic, gender, and Irish studies. Inadvertently, perhaps, these same scholars elide this understanding of the political with another more demotic understanding associated with protest movements in the nineteen-sixties. Then, to be “political” meant to be engaged and to subordinate all other facets of life to a particular socio-political cause. It was, in fact, in contradistinction to this notion of politics as engaged and conscious action that Foucault outlined his almost despairing Nietzschean social theory.

Nonetheless, in the literature classroom, these two understandings intermingle with often confusing results—especially for the reading of poetry. Novels traditionally accounted as part of the canon remain in place, but our understanding of them has developed to appreciate what they leave unspoken, the way in which a text can inform its reader’s extra-literary subjectivity. Novels outside the traditional canon are also granted entry into this discursive space, precisely because—sometimes—what originally set them “outside” was their disruptive or revealing emplotment of lines of the political. Adept at tracing the curvature of any number of ideologies in prose narratives, most contemporary scholars lack the patience to perform a similar task with poems. An ignorance of and prejudice against poetic form (the complex of rhyme, meter, and stanza) often exacerbates this impatience of discovering political form, and poems by and large get ignored. In scholarship and teaching alike, when the odd poem does make its appearance, it does so because it was written in such a way as to make it easily available as a “political” document in the second sense of that term.

In other words, scholars will seldom consider a poem like John Crowe Ransom’s “Miriam Tazewell” in an essay or classroom, despite the striking way in which that poem projects anxiety about democratic chaos, material progress, and scientific rationalism onto the domestic sphere and the female body (although, I note, Cary Nelson has done so). More likely, they will make token representations of the genre of poetry by discussing explicitly, baldly “engaged” poems. Denise Levertov’s raw and dated protests

against Vietnam or whistling construction workers may get taught precisely because it is so raw as already to be “digested” into a pat political message suitable for the undergraduate classroom. Langston Hughes’s “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” gets taught because the title is so helpful one need hardly attend to the languorous lines that follow; and it also gets celebrated because of its author’s race, despite the poem’s appropriation of romantic nationalist and structuralist concepts that most contemporary scholars would find troubling. Because poems *seem* to resist the subtle hermeneutics of ideology, their use in the academic milieu gets reduced to that of the campaign billboard. And, to extend this observation, only those poems most aggressively, even obnoxiously, susceptible to this “billboarding” get studied. Certain supposedly “avant-garde” confections, for instance those of Charles Bernstein and Lyn Hejinian, gain a privileged institutional credibility. The very opacity of their work makes it seem consummately “engaged”—precisely because, it would seem, upon reading it one is left wondering, “If this is not political of intent, what else could it be?”

***Caplan’s first ambition
is to demonstrate that nothing
in poetry or poetic form inheres.***

David Caplan’s pithy yet wide ranging study steps into this prosaic academic atmosphere and carves out a niche for the study of poetry *per se*, but especially for poetry written in form. Formal verse, since the age of the New Critics and, in a different way, since the appearance of New Formalist poetry in the nineteen-eighties, has repeatedly been stigmatized as retrograde: as conservative on aesthetic grounds, but on political ones as well. Most famously, Diane Wakoski’s “The New Conservatism in American Poetry” (which appeared in *American Book Review* 8.4) accused poets who write in form of being unpatriotic. Caplan makes short work of this odd Whitmanian essentialism, but he engages at length the prejudice of which it is exemplary.

Accepting the hermeneutics of suspicion that renders everything political, he demonstrates the extensive but unstable role poetic form plays in the politics of language. His close studies of three sestinas convincingly show that this most constraining of poetic forms does not inhibit the significance of the works themselves. Rather, the tensions between tradition and the contemporary, between the desire to speak politically and the desire to achieve art make Elizabeth Bishop’s “A Miracle for Breakfast” both a typical thirties political poem and an ambivalent critique of that passing genre. Anthony Hecht’s “The Book of Yolek,” Caplan shows, manifests the guilt and despair of the poet’s witnessing of the machinery of the Holocaust during World War II. The repetition of the word “camp,” which begins the poem as “summer camp,” slips by the end of the poem into “death camp.” A sestina by Donald Justice serves as occasion to suggest the interdependence of “traditional” or formal poetry with the writings of the “avant-garde,” as a poker game with John Cage results in Justice’s own formal experiments.

In his most impressive chapter, “Why Not the Heroic Couplet?,” Caplan mounts a compelling argument for the need to historicize the nature and function of poetic forms. The couplet’s unpopularity, even among contemporary formalist poets, Caplan argues, stems from its association with the Augustan

wit and satire of John Dryden and Alexander Pope. Its close rhymes, neatly ordered like neoclassical gardens, and mechanical like Newtonian physics, have been thought suitable for the eighteenth century, but untenable in our irrational, postmodern jungle. However, recent scholarship on the eighteenth century has revealed it as far more an age of anxiety and sordidness than of Reason and Light. Caplan harnesses these insights to show how the couplet can simultaneously remain historically linked to neoclassical aesthetics and become compellingly suitable for the expression of suffering in the age of AIDS (as Thom Gunn’s “Lament” demonstrates). To scan the prosody, we have also to know its history, but to interpret a poetic form’s history we must—with greater difficulty—understand how it informs our present.

As mention of AIDS may suggest, Caplan is also anxious to show that formal verse can be as engaged as the most chopped and incoherent Language poetry or as the most artless and ardent free-verse polemic. His account of Adrienne Rich’s leftist intellectual appropriation of a Persian fixed form, the ghazal, in the sixties, and the later protest and recovery of the “real” ghazal by Kashmiri poet Agha Shahid Ali illuminates on several counts. The narrative of Rich’s sundering of this intricate verse form into a free-verse medium by which to assert her solidarity with the Black Arts and the Black Panthers movements leaves political free-verse poetry itself looking crude and blind to its own (albeit minor) role in cultural violence. Ali’s reintroduction of the complex requirements for a ghazal to be a ghazal, intriguingly, makes the acceptance of a verse form’s challenges appear a test of one’s devotion to cultural authenticity. The use of rhyme becomes an engaged act indeed; at the same time, the whole narrative disenchanting one with the spectacle of identity politics trumping identity politics. Caplan’s chapter on homosexual sonnet sequences, “When a Form Comes Out of the Closet,” is similarly burdened. And yet he succeeds in demonstrating that the most venerable—and therefore antiquated—of English verse forms can, precisely in virtue of its long and various history, become an especially potent medium for protest and subversion in our current episode of the sexual revolution.

Caplan’s first ambition is to demonstrate that nothing in poetry or poetic form inheres. The relation of form to content is always contingent on unstable historical conditions. Beyond this mere instability, however, Caplan shows that form plays a crucial role in rendering language (or “content”) ambivalent. His readings testify that the excitement of literature is to be found largely in the aporias, paradoxes, and fissures the work itself creates. If everything is political, then poetry shows that it is richly and complexly so—and therefore demands sensitive scrutiny. If some varieties of free verse claim to be engaged or even revolutionary, so also can the turns of a sonnet. Indeed, formal verse may be *more* potentially radical precisely because the long legacy of prosody infuses even something as ostensibly harmless as enjambment with meaning for the historically attentive.

This book is not a defense of formal verse, however. Rather, it explicitly refuses the terms of debate that set free and formal poets in enemy camps. Caplan moves fluently among all kinds of poetry and thereby makes an argument for a return to the close,

————— Wilson continued on next page

historically informed reading of poetry “beyond the prosody wars.” It is a study accessible to academics and casual readers alike, unburdened by jargon and enamored of its subject. One possibility this volume’s

title implicitly proposes may be whether poetry and criticism might regain a wider audience if more writers balanced sophistication with clarity, seriousness with enthusiasm, as Caplan surely has.

James Matthew Wilson is a Sorin Research Fellow at the University of Notre Dame. His poems, reviews, and essays appear in many journals, including Contemporary Poetry Review.

THE POEM AND LE POÈME

TOUCH TO AFFLICTION

Nathalie Stephens

Coach House Books
http://www.chbooks.com
80 pages; paper, \$13.95

Canadian poet Nathalie Stephen’s latest book, *Touch to Affliction*, suspends the reader in a state of in-betweenness: between languages, between cities, between “I” and “you”—a diffuse hermaphroditism that reaches beyond the “facts” of sex and gender to the writing of poetry itself. One outcome of this paradoxical and fraught condition is “Le Poème Affligé,” one in which “Affliction is the blood of poetry” and “the poet must make language into two things simultaneously: sobriety and passion.” In the poems collected here, language reveals itself as a series of nesting dolls, with one word or meaning nestled (or nailed) inside another.

For Stephens, the “inside” language, immediate and close to the body, is French, while English is “[t]he language in which I write. The language that sets my body against itself. And dismantles the present.” This may be a partial truth, however, since, although English predominates throughout the book, French intervenes in many guises—as word, phrase, even etymological double entendre—and inhabits this poet’s English. For example, in “Finitude Lamentation” she writes, “I rue the many avenues of suffering but can name none.” Readers are meant to notice that, in French, the noun “rue” translates as “street” and the verb “ruer” as “kick” or “lash out,” while the English verb means to repent or regret. “Avenue” is “avenue” in both languages, however, and is of course a kind of street. Stephens presents here a sly demonstration of how knowledge of more than one language increases exponentially the amount and complexity of wordplay a poet can engage in.

The notion of disembodied language invites the French feminists (Julia Kristeva and Simone de Beauvoir are mentioned in the text) into Stephens’s poems. The writings of Hélène Cixous seem especially pertinent here, with her call for an embodied “écriture féminine” and her positing of a universal bisexuality.

Stephens demands in turn, “Where is the poet who will return language to the body? // Where is the body that is prepared to receive language?” The relationship of body and language becomes even more complicated as Stephens thinks/speaks/writes in multiple languages that will not exactly translate one into the other. She says, “In another language I would say: Désincarné. But I would not say: Disembodied,” and “Le corps is not the same as corpse.”

Touch to Affliction begins with an unusual epigraph as prelude, a fragment of the music score of “Already It Is Dusk” from *String Quartet No. 1, Opus 62*, by the Polish composer Henryk Mikołaj Górecki. The notation “*Ferocissimo-Furioso-Marcatissimo*” proves to be prescient as an introduction to the poems that follow. For there is a ferocity in Stephens’s writing, and all the fury of the twenty-first century urban wanderer, great-granddaughter perhaps of Walter Benjamin’s *flâneur*, who walks streets and traverses bridges in cities both inundated and gone up in flames. Which cities? Toronto? Montréal? Paris? All cities? “The city catches fire. // And we are in it,” and “We will drown in the city and we will take our languages with us.” These are cities in intimate relation to the body, cities that “fester on our thighs.” Paradoxically, the city that grows out of the body also transgresses against it.

*In the poems collected here,
language reveals itself as a series
of nesting dolls.*

Wandering from poem to poem among the ruins, Stephens presents us with a recurring image/thought, “the small body,” that almost resembles an allegorical character in a morality tale, one that conjoins with the “incensed” city and may be its casualty. This small body plays multiple roles and shows up in every neighborhood: It is “the tooth-scraped sand-blasted body,” the small body “I carried...in my teeth,” the small body that “rises from under,” the small body with a face that “falls from the arms,” as well as the small body that “shudders with the earth.”

The play of intertextuality in *Touch to Affliction*—with references to an array of writers, composers, philosophers, cultural theorists, and historical figures, such as Benjamin, Kristeva, and Edward Said; Klaus Barbie, “The Butcher of Lyon”; composers Górecki and Arvo Pärt; and French philosopher Emmanuel

Paula Koneazny

Lévinas—connects Stephens’s poems to the writing of others who invoke the same names. In particular, another contemporary Canadian writer, Gail Scott, comes to mind. Scott has retraced Walter Benjamin’s perambulations around Paris in her reconstruction of that city, *My Paris* (2003). She and Stephens seem such kindred spirits in their investigation of the politics, sexuality, and translatability of language(s) that I feel they must be literary acquaintances.

Stephens’s poems pose questions of ownership: Whose language? Whose city? Whose body? Written in a quasi-epistolary form with a speaker and a spoken to, an “I,” the writer, and a “you,” the written to, the poems detail a list of grievances relating to “your language,” such as “In your language, to attach a word to a thing is to resist the thing”; “Your language gives me order. It says nothing of la douleur”; “What your language touches moves. What moves beckons murder”; and “Your language in my city and every indecency.” The most damning of the accusations, however, may be the speaker’s recognition that “Your language, it is in me.” But who is accusing whom here? Are “I” and “you” lovers? Are they, rather, two aspects (not voices, since “you” never speaks in the poems) of the poet or the persona of the poem? In the poem “Not Paris,” the speaker says, “If these are letters to myself, the names beside them are thin screens of hope.” Identity here remains undecided, just as everything in the world of these poems partakes of their this-and-that nature.

“Nos Langues Sont Incommensurables et Meurtrières (Our Languages Are Infinite and Murderous),” the final piece in *Touch to Affliction*, unlike its precursors, begins in French and then, midway, switches back to English. Any distinction between the two languages, however, seems finally to have become inconsequential. Devastation now permeates both. The bridge between the two languages is a violent one, rough, sexual, and unromantic: “Comme c’est crasseux le lieux où tu vas. | Fistfully. Mouthfully. The place you take into you is an injury and my prints are all over you. This is your city. Your tawdry.” The ruins outside, in their beauty and horror, are inside, and vice versa. The only reprieve held out to the reader remains an earlier, conditional one: “Earth is rapture. Maybe.”

Paula Koneazny lives in Sebastopol, California. Her poetry has appeared most recently in *Double Room*, *580 Split*, *Phoebe and Volt*. *dpress* has published her chapbook *The Year I Was Alive*.

A VIRTUOSO’S LAMENT

CADENZA FOR THE SCHNEIDERMANN VIOLIN CONCERTO

Joshua Cohen

Fugue State Press
http://www.fuguestatepress.com
390 pages; paper, \$18.00

Any reader able to appreciate Fugue State Press’s clever cover for Joshua Cohen’s *Cadenza for the Schneidermann Violin Concerto*, a pastiche of a cover from Schirmer’s Library of Musical Classics, will know what a cadenza is. Typically, late in the first movement of a concerto, the orchestra pauses expectantly, usually on the dominant, and falls silent as the soloist delivers thrilling pyrotechnical passages culminating in a long trill that cues the orchestra to

L. Timmel Duchamp

resume playing. Nevertheless, Cohen prefaces his first novel with a lengthy but rudimentary description emphasizing that performers today rarely create their own cadenzas but instead use those with canonical status. According to Cohen, what initially interested him in the form was its description by pianist Alexander Wald as “an extended solo passage in an *im-*

— *Duchamp continued on next page*

Copyright of American Book Review is the property of Writer's Review, Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.