

Is Beauty in 21st Century Poetry Obsolete?

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“Where does beauty begin?” asked John Cage, “And where does it end? Where beauty ends, that is where the artist begins.¹” -- The relation of the artist to beauty has changed over the last century. Where once artists were wholly devoted to the pursuit of beauty we now find it common for artists to be very suspicious of beauty and to be aware of beauty’s darker side. Their preoccupation with this dark side of beauty signifies a deep rift that even by the 21st Century has not resolved.

While artists and poets such as the dadaists and the symbolists certainly complicated prevailing ideas about beauty in art and poetry, after the rise of fascism in Europe we find wider spread rejection of classical notions of beauty by critics and artists. This widespread rejection seems to stem, at least in part, from an aversion to the Nazi’s exploitation of classical notions of beauty for the purposes of propaganda.

The example of the notorious “Hall of Great German Art²” included representational paintings and sculptures that were commissioned by Nazi propagandists to make fascist values explicit so that even non-collaborating representational art was vulnerable to manipulation. Part of the problem of figurative language was its association with the symbolic mode, with its vulnerability to idealization and representation so, just as in painting, a preference for artistic abstraction was due, in part, to the perception that it embodied anti-fascist values.

Many literary tropes associated with the lyric poetic mode such as metaphor were exploited for fascist purposes and as a result --conscientious critics adopted a general suspicion of metaphor and a preference for metonymy in literature. Later, post-structural critiques of beauty posited the classical models of beauty as inherently eugenic. There appeared to be two ways out

of the problem. One way was to value realism because realism appeared to avoid ideas and ideals on which ideology could be based.

Another way out was the pursuit of abstraction. Some of the language poetry written today adopts this strategy. So, while language poets such as Charles Bernstein and P. Inman have already critiqued and rejected some problems that might accompany “realism”, it would still seem that poetry after modernism has redefined its relation to meaning, beauty, thought, and imagination in such a way that some of lyric poetry’s most powerful effects have fallen out of favor and use. Quite a lot of abstract poetry produces an effect of alienation rather than revelation. A pervasive fear of the power of figurative language and the problem of its uncontainability and vulnerability to underinterpretation has led some poets to near complete avoidance of it. For some poets, a disjunctive utterances with irreducible and elusive meaning is preferable to a anything that might produce a fixed symbol and thereby calcify thought.

The underlying reasoning appears to be that if we never invest in metaphors in the first place then we won’t need critical faculties to oppose those who would control us by our investment in metaphors. But what else happens when we no longer invest in metaphors? I fear that we may lose something valuable because we will have sacrificed imagination and perhaps more importantly we will have lost our ability to make certain kinds of critical proposals that can only be expressed in the language of metaphor.

So, what was the nature of these fascist perversions of beauty that have led us to the present situation? One of the most widely recognized and broadly discussed crises involved the perversion or use of classical ideals of beauty to establish a totalitarian archetype to reflect a supposedly superior culture. The aftermath of fascist propaganda campaigns led intellectuals to radically doubt whether beauty or art or poetry could ever exist independently of an “official culture”³--that art would sooner or later be appropriated and made to serve the secret purposes of ideology. The most famous example of this criticism comes, of course, from Adorno’s *Prisms* in which he concluded, “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.” (Adorno 34.)

Adorno's statement may be construed as a rejection of Aristotle's claim that art is greater than history, more universal since it tells events as eternal truths rather than as events which are temporally limited.⁴ After World War II, there was the prevailing sense that the events that had taken place were so cataclysmic that no art form could be viewed as greater than they. Any symbol could only be reductive in comparison to events that overwhelmed any attempt to represent them.

In addition to a sense of its being reductive, symbol itself would never be viewed the same way after Nazism. The Nazi's use of symbols, such as the swastika, to represent a new era of a purified people would sully the idea of purity ever after. In 1937, the Nazi Minister of Culture, Joseph Goebbels had produced a museum of so-called "Great German Art" [figures 1-6] for which he selected and commissioned officially approved works with supposedly eternal value. The exhibitions consisted of works with symbolism that would be familiar and resonant with Germans. Some examples include paintings of **peasants**—these paintings were not commissioned, but rather *appropriated* for the exhibition, that is to say the artist was not necessarily in favor of Nazi agendas for his art. The subject of peasants was selected because the Nazis wanted to present an image of an ideal Germany in which an attachment to the land figured prominently. This was also a way of symbolically nodding to the symbolic political inclusion of farmers and workers without actually promising a change in their political relations. Also included were **idealized female nudes, portrayals of an idealized masculinity** through athleticism. These paintings and the *were* commissioned specifically for the museum. (*Read caption.*) as was this heroic *bas relief*.

Interestingly, rather than simply exclude modern paintings of supposedly transient value, Modern abstract paintings were exhibited instead as part of the notorious traveling exhibition of "**Degenerate Art.**"⁵[figure 7] The Degenerate Art exhibition was staged in 1937, the same year as the museum of "Great German Art." The Degenerate Art exhibition was intended to show abstraction as corrupt and celebrating disease or incompetence but there was a more at stake in

the exhibition than a spurious purification of art. Non-representational, non-symbolic abstraction threatened the symbolic force on which Nazi propaganda relied.(Griffen, 1995)⁶ Nazi propaganda relied heavily on the ability of symbols to evoke the desired sentiments in their targets. It was necessary to appeal to values that could be summed up and evoked through symbolism or pointed imagery. Abstraction interfered with that project by refusing the language of symbol, by refusing to mean in any simplistic way that could be appropriated to political purposes.

When **Schultze-Naumberg in “Art and Race” [figure 8]** juxtaposed abstract , semi-representational paintings with photographs of mentally disabled and disfigured individuals he hoped to force a literal reading of abstraction as symbolic, in this case, symbolic of human deformity. Nazis used symbols in a peculiarly literalizing way so that symbols of beauty could be used in the promotion of a hygienic and eugenic culture. The idea of beauty came to seem inextricable from its connection to an operation wherein undesirable elements are expelled from the desirable. After this period, beauty in art could not be viewed apart from its manipulations by Nazis as a procrustean bed, a terrorizing selective symbol, the agent of discrimination and persecution. Adorno’s pronouncement that , “it is impossible to write poetry today”(ibid, 34) announced an intractable impasse for beauty.

In poetry, metaphor, long considered an essential element of lyric poetry, and the substance of lyric beauty also began to raise suspicions.¹ Simile and metaphor came to be seen as integral to and inextricable from propagandistic rhetoric. In films such as “Der Ewige Jude⁷” Jews were compared to rats, in establishing a simile, its perverse logic could and would later be used to justify programs of genocide by referring instead to a program of extermination.

In “Representing Auschwitz,⁸” Sidra deKoven Ezrahi quotes Tadeuz Borowski, holocaust survivor and author of “This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen,” a story taken from his

¹ Paul Celan’s efforts to construct a poetic force in which language could be purified of the taint of its propagandistic uses with such resonant metaphors as “black milk”, notwithstanding.

death camp experience. In it he uses a chilling trope, “The delousing is finally over and our striped suits are back from the tanks of Cyclone B solution, an efficient killer of lice in clothing and men in gas chambers.”² Ezrahi remarks on the way in which propagandistic rhetoric collapsed the distance between metaphor and referent. She remarks:

The apposition of lice in clothing and men in gas chambers without any linking word of comparison preempts the metaphoric construction and obliterates the imagination as agent of meaning. The objectification of humanity which is also the reification of metaphor, makes the language of comparison – or for that matter, art itself – obsolete or downright obscene. The world in which people were treated *in the manner of* lice is a parody of the world in which people are *represented* as treating each other like vermin; in the economy of human imagination, it marks the appalling distance from metaphor to metamorphosis. (Ibid)

Ezrahi observed the potential of metaphor, when used as an epithet, to collapse the “appalling distance” between literary meaning from abstraction to precedent, or as she puts it from “metaphor to metamorphosis.” She observes that a rhetoric of persons as vermin has the potential to lay the groundwork for a justification for their treatment as such. The potential violence of metaphor could also lie in its function to obscure and transform its referent, a sort of literary annihilation that may also haunt the search for a politically conscious poetic.

Metonymy, for a time it seems, had won approval as an acceptable alternative to metaphor. Roman Jakobson in “Two Aspects of Language and two Types of Aphasic Disturbances”⁹ noted the tendency of metonymy to function as the master trope for realism, “In the scene of Anna Karenina’s suicide Tolstoj’s artistic attention is focused on the heroine’s handbag.”(Jakobson 111) Metonymy does not exchange objects one for another but instead

² While it is distasteful to classify such a statement in a literary way, this type of statement or trope is ordinarily regarded as a zeugma, a device always used for ironic effect.

reveals objects as extensions of greater entities. A realist trend in poetry came to be seen as less specious, less suspect than the use of symbols or metaphor. The previously central master tropes of poetry, metaphor and symbol, came under suspicion and *realism* gained acceptance as the *more* ethical literary mode,.

The Language movement in poetry has tended to oppose realism, but its proponents tread carefully to avoid reconstructing the lyric modes that realists opposed. Realism's asceticism and minimalism lacked the formal invention that Charles Bernstein believed was necessary in order to create what he has called an "anti-absorptive" poetry. Bernstein's goal for anti-absorptive poetry is that it might be *irreducible* to an "accumulation of devices & subject matters." To illustrate an example of what an anti-absorptive poem might look like, we will examine the poem, "Waver" by P. Inman and the discussion of reading it properly proposed by Bernstein³ [figure 9]

it was only her curved say
 leaving till any more
 I want
 to write noise
 a white
 out of between
 think off-misted
 (piled holster)
 wouldn't say "fault."
 stills by size
 glass cattle
 (denominations between her work)
 kints grasp

³ Notable participant in the "language poetry" movement.

off that
 cinder ink
 dreadlocks pollen
 seems to any on
 draws as pang
 waiting for a keyboard
 “so much depends
 on starch”
 ute broils
 Keats with the wrong facts
 Everything took place at all

Bernstein explicates it thus:

the reason it is difficult to talk about
 the meaning of a poem—in a way that doesn't seem
 frustratingly superficial or partial—is that by
 designating a text a poem, one suggests that its
 meanings are to be located in some “complex” be-
 yond an accumulation of devices & subject matters.
 a poetic reading can be given to any
 piece of writing; a “poem” may be understood as
 writing specifically designed to absorb, or inflate
 with, proactive—rather than reactive—styles of
 reading. “Artifice” is a measure of a poem's
 intractability to being read as the sum of its

devices and subject matters. In this sense,
 “artifice” is the contradiction of “realism,” with
 its insistence on presenting an unmediated
 (immediate) experience of facts, either of the
 “external” world of nature or the “internal” world
 of the mind...Facts in poetry are primarily
 factitious (Beach 3)¹⁰

Bernstein recommends that the rhetorical strategies of “Waver” be read as “content” and the
 “content” as “form.” When he says that “facts in poetry are primarily factitious” what he means
 is that the “artifice of the poem is able to subvert ‘realism with its insistence on presenting an
 ‘unmediated or (immediate) experience of facts, so that the poem can never be mistaken for a
 presentation of narrative or content nor merely appreciated for its techniques toward a narrative
 goal. Bernstein considers the artifice of the poem to be more salient than its “content,” its
 meaning or some reference outside its own language. By reversing the usual reading strategy,
 Bernstein further guarantees that the poem cannot be broken down and summed up, that the
 process of breaking down and summing up is itself a reading strategy that leads ultimately to
 meaning’s containment and reduction. Bernstein resorts to abstraction in poetry because of its
 seeming refusal to function symbolically as well as offering the poem as an antidote to realism.

Paradoxically, realism is here viewed as more vulnerable to being reduced to its symbolic
 function than abstraction. Just as the Nazis had used representational art to represent something
 more than a human being or a landscape, realism is unable to escape representation which is in
 turn unable to escape its own restaging as symbol for almost any ideological purpose. One can
 claim, as Ezra Pound did, that things are symbolic only of themselves, but the reading of things as
 symbols is impossible to control. Even artistic movements aimed against representation cannot
 escape the fate of being read as symbols. And yet, as we have seen from Goebbel’s exhibition of

“Degenerate Art” the refusal of representation so conducive to symbol can still be presented as a representation of chaos. The opacity of the diction is meant to dissuade any simplistic interpretations. Its ungraspable quality is consonant with one of Clement Greenberg’s¹¹ defenses of abstract painting, namely, that abstract painting promoted “disinterested contemplation” in a time and place given over almost wholly to utility and interest. I wonder if Bernstein’s concern that poetry be “anti-absorbitive” has to do with a desire for poetry as non-commercial. Perhaps, this idea of the anti-absorbitive affirms poems that refuse to serve *any* utilitarian purpose such as politics or pleasure so that these can then be seen, along with commercialism, as potentially co-opting entities.

So, it would seem that abstraction could provide poets with a stance very much in line with various “art for art sake” movements, so that art or poetry would not be subject to forces of the market, taste, political manipulation, but provided a sense of freedom and independence from concerns external to the art-making itself. This explains what abstraction can do in the negative, in other words, what abstraction refuses to do. Inman’s experimental poem seems to ask whether words can be strung together that make no pictures, only differences, as if to test Saussure’s theory of language¹².

So far, I have somewhat simplistically equated beauty with the symbolic mode of meaning, but I don’t wish to give the impression that beauty is somehow the opposite of abstraction, only to question why a certain point, beauty as a goal was no longer desirable and how abstraction somehow appeared as the antidote. The choice of Inman and Bernstein to write abstract poetry leaves open many questions. Can beauty be defined in such a way that it would include poems like Inman’s? Is beauty escapist, allowing the reader to turn away from misery or injustice? Is abstraction any less escapist? Any less elitist? Any less commercial or useful? Can beauty irritate or is it by definition a balm?

While I have correlated the processes of relinquishing beauty and relinquishing symbols, they are not identical, but they are related. Traditional understandings of beauty and symbol

would have to follow from a world view in which universal propositions such as truth, beauty, and justice were accepted. Today, many consider universals and ideals largely untenable; as a result, some trepidation about a symbol's ability to deceive may have led Bernstein and P. Inman to oppose poetry based in symbol altogether. If all poets were to follow suit, abandoning symbol-based poetry in favor of abstract poetry, paradoxically, there would be less opportunity to hone the task of deciphering symbols and determining the manner in which they are being used. More troubling still, the weakening of critical faculties and practices might decrease the ability to oppose those who would control us by their manipulation of symbols in which we are invested. What if while providing an alternative to commercialism, some forms of abstract poetry actually left readers more vulnerable to commercialism's reach?

What is at stake in the loss of symbol is not only beauty, I believe, but imagination. Metaphor incorporates elements of both beauty and imagination because, like beauty, metaphor seems to be always pointing to something beyond what we are able to grasp. Metaphor produces beauty by taking a familiar image and proposing it as a model for understanding problems or conditions we don't yet fully understand. Metaphor *produces* thought by inventing an image for a previously unimaginable thing. It functions on the *brink* of thought, giving body to bodiless impressions. It enables us to name intangible realities so that we can then imagine them in a new form.

Understandably, the melancholy of the last half century elicited a cynicism toward ideas of beauty, symbols, and metaphor. But, *even though* we have been dwelling for a long time in a culture aimed against beauty, a period of mourning, and more recently, a period of pessimism and contempt, *if* beauty in poetry is bound up with symbol, metaphor, and figuration, and with producing certain effects of meaning, it may *yet* be worth examining how beauty is defined and how it is used; especially, whether it is now possible to discern beauty from propaganda. Perhaps it would be useful if we could begin to imagine beauty, not as an earthly reflection of a Platonic ideal, nor as a procrustean bed, but rather as *an act of extension*. I find a certain beauty when a poem produces a clarifying experience or as Emily Dickinson described it, "If I feel physically as

if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry.¹³" The distinction between whether a given metaphor produces beauty or propaganda may begin in whether it *clarifies* a previously inaccessible perception or whether it *reifies* our expectations of a subject.

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