

Poetry's Evolving Ecology: Toward a Post-Symbol Landscape

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Abstract:

This meditative essay sees the shifting of Western poetics from Modernism to Postmodernism as evolutionary, and considers formative imagination's function in that shifting to serve as a resource for contingency. According to this kind of thinking, poetics and ecology are influenced by globalization. The present meditation explores the shedding of cultural symbols in poetry baring the more contingent language of signifiers. It suggests that the resulting ecology of signifiers brings readers closer to nature because it removes assumed values of a given culture. The result is postmodern approaches to poetry. The essay outlines the relationship between the formative imagination and contingency. It remarks on how the nature of mediation and the formative imagination pivot on contingency, allowing poetics to adjust to perpetual change. It also recognizes that the signifier and aporia have become basic tools of the poetic imagination marking time until multiculturalism has established itself and perhaps a new world literature becomes one language. The meditation uses a poem by Jorie Graham as an example of poetry bridging religious symbolism to Darwinian thought. Charles Bernstein's poem, stripped of cultural symbolism, is an example of a poem of contingency. Together, they illustrate the evolution of poetics and its most contemporary ecology. The meditation concludes with my own poetry, highlighting its changing ecology from cultural to multicultural symbolism and then to the threshold of contingency.

*Our language and our culture are as much a contingency, as much a result of thousands of small mutations finding niches (and millions of others finding no niches), as are the orchids and anthropoids.
(Richard Rorty Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity, 16)*

The trouble about this insistence on the values of discipline and integrity is that the critics who insist on them make judgments that prove as fallible as those of critics who don't. (Stephen Spender Journals 1939-1983, 353)

In the town of Marblehead, Massachusetts as in many New England coastal communities in the 21st Century, homes dot the tops of tree-dominated hills with cliffs that spill into a harbor. These homes in New England often have very large double-pane windows, that look out into

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the branches of evergreens, maples, birches, and oaks that are homes to a magnificent variety of birds. The woods that surround these homes sustain fox, rabbit, raccoons, and rumored deer and other regional wildlife. Residents and local officials are sensitive to their daily influences on the historic nature of this area and on the eco-system that makes up the region's earth, sea, and sky. Local inhabitants understand that the eco-systems are always in flux and that our presence influences that flux.

While the people who live here are at home in these houses, they are also at home in language. Their imaginations are the nimble places of possibility that allow them to articulate, influence, and perhaps survive their current evolving ecology in language and in their neighborhoods. Just as the automobiles and buildings have an impact on the ecology around houses, cultural symbols influence the ecology of language. The following reflection reviews contemporary thinking on mediation, outlines the function of the symbol from Modernism to Postmodernism, and asserts that poetry's formative imagination in Postmodernism may itself be seen as an evolutionary mechanism for marking time in contingency and as the place of possibility, allowing a world literature, culture, and perhaps language to emerge.

In his book *The Marginalization of Poetry*, Bob Perelman assumes that the absolute contact with nature, often attributed to other animals, is lost on humans and is not attainable. He does so as he reviews language poets' attempt at progress toward it. He frustrates the notion of a forward trajectory and progress in poetry. However he leaves the door open to poetry's evolution. He tells the reader, "The administered dioramas of literary history contain scenes that on a gross scale can be read clearly enough so that we can watch revolutionaries battling conservatives and fighting against genres and the genres themselves flourishing, fading, and mutating" (38-57). Terry Eagleton uses the "crude fabular form" of biblical genesis to explain how humans have moved away from a more immediate world and culture of nature's absolute; in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, he suggests how poets might regain paradisiacal relevance. Both of these authors address the growing irrelevance of poetry to all citizens. According to Eagleton, people conventionalize mediation, including their alienation, embracing what he calls a "dissociation of sensibilities" in politics, ethics, and aesthetics" (366-415).

Marjorie Perloff, in her essay "On Steve McCaffrey's 'Lag,'" recognizes a dialectic between popular culture and poetry as worth watching during the "evolution" of the twentieth-century poetic, when she writes about McCaffrey's *Black Debt* (114). The deteriorating situation between poetry and any audience marks a continuation of the crisis in the humanities that postmodern theorists argue began with the Enlightenment. The idea of evolution—whether it means change or progress toward an unmediated poetry—is an often disputed idea in the arts; yet an unmediated poetry may be the only way to attract a larger audience in late capitalism. The scientific language used by these authors in their discussion of poetry is not new to it. Indeed, evolution may be helpful as a loose metaphor to explain the effects of globalization and of multiculturalism on the formative imagination of the poet, and thus to decipher how that imagination may help shape the idea of world literature. If "evolution" is a helpful term, then using the idea that poetry's ecology is the result of formative imagination at work may also be helpful.

The poet Stephen Spender defines the formative imagination as the ever-metamorphosing imagination responding to contingency as it builds or deconstructs its world through the language the poet uses. In two lectures for Audio-Forum, Sound Seminars in the last century, Stephen Spender tracked the origins of what is today meant by contingency. One is titled *Necessity of Being Absolutely Modern* and the second is *Poetic Vision and Modern Literature*. In the title of the first lecture, Spender is referring to Arthur Rimbaud's genius as one believing in

the magic of language. Spender recounts his having lived the Modernist movement from beginning to end in a span of two years. In the second lecture, he explains the inverted nature of visionary writing by modern poets and novelists. For poets such as Blake, New Jerusalems are described in full. For modern poets, they are alternative values referred to or gestured toward merely. There too he comes back to magic: not the magic of language only, but a magic of cultural creation mythology (*Absolutely Modern*). The magic acts of Modernism seem to have been an attempt through therapy to heal what Paul Valéry called “the disorder of mind” in the mind of Europe (Valéry 96).

In the first lecture, Spender refers to a “melting back of the formative imagination” as the magic of poetry working to re-create reality and to cure the early twentieth-century affliction. He uses this idea convincingly to illustrate Rimbaud’s disillusionment with modern poetry (*Absolutely Modern*). The same issue seems to have plagued modern poets: literary legend has it that Ezra Pound insisted from a cage in Italy that he speak with Churchill, Stalin, and Roosevelt. Pound believed that with the right combination of words, he could convince them that they were on the wrong side in the war. Spender suggests that modern poets believed that the melting back of the formative imagination to the creation myth of Western culture would allow them to start again, fresh in Eden, I presume, perhaps from the moment before the fall; this time correcting mistakes and doing it right (*Absolutely Modern*).

In his second lecture on visionary Modernism, Spender explains how the utopian impulses of modern literature thrash around the suffering of the artist who is stuck with aristocratic sympathies and the fading of Christianity in an ever shrinking or globalizing and industrialized world. He concludes the lecture with the idea that the impetus of a movement beginning with Baudelaire has changed and that “the main spring” of the impetus has been removed (*Poetic Vision*). He suggests to the reader that the main spring is the artist’s cultural search for a pathway back to some mythic utopian Judeo-Christian cultural beginning. The Holocaust and the intermingling of cultures via political and economic imperialism, or through other desperate and democratic motives, removed from Modernism the metaphor of the “main spring” of cultural creation mythologies (*Poetic Vision*). Language’s contingency, caused by the aporia between signified and signifier, has replaced it, thus Perelman’s assumption. Language’s contingency applies to all languages and so contains a broader appeal for poetry of all cultures. The magic may now be in the naming, the wall against which poets beat their heads.

The formative imagination is important because it implies that impress or evolutionary inheritance may be malleable, sensitive to its environment, to its ecology. Just as the stem cell can produce any cell, the formative imagination is an active agent and it promises to transform impress through the contingency of postmodern/post-avant poetry. However, instead of melting the imagination back to Eden, formative imagination may itself be seen as an evolutionary mechanism marking time in contingency, the place of possibility, allowing a world literature, culture, and perhaps language to emerge. The national impresses of languages, nationalism, and religion may prevent a world culture, literature, and language from forming. However, as with species of plants and animals, the world is losing languages all the time in the postmodern world. If we look at the development of language and literature in the once colonial America and at the struggle of Modernism in the West, we might infer how on a larger scale world literature may evolve.

The war between Modernists like Eliot and Williams may have been inspired by petty jealousies on perhaps both sides, but it is the crossroads. The struggle of Modernism may be seen as one of direction by Western nationalism and its cultures in response to Valéry’s psychological diagnosis. If so, then Eliot’s and Pound’s guarding as gatekeepers of Western and national

histories and high cultures was one direction. Another was suggested by Williams' iconoclastic exhortation:

It's the words, the words we need to get back to, words washed clean. [...] Stein has gone systematically to work smashing every connotation that words have ever had, in order to get them back clean. [...] It can't be helped that the whole house has to come down. In fact the whole house has to come down. [...]. And it's got to come down because it has to be rebuilt. And it has to be rebuilt by unbound thinking. (163)

Though Wallace Stevens' poetry may have been more successful with Williams' aim, Williams' articulation was to point the direction of art and culture upon the victory of the allies in World War II. Of course, at the time, the implications of the victory to culture and nationalism were not obvious, any more than the victories of capitalism and democracy were obvious.

In the West (Western Europe and the Western Hemisphere), the victory of the allies was going to mean movement toward capitalism and democracy as though they were one. It meant an unspoken promise to open global cultural gates so that the "barbarians" (local under-served, subaltern, and "other" cultural populations alike), could perhaps take part, even if illiterate, in poverty, and on the margins. The contingency implied in the movement mentioned above might be thought of as evolutionary in nature. For many countries capitalism entered via the wooden horse of democracy. Of course, half the world remained under communist influence, including places close to American soil, such as Cuba. (In fact, Cuba didn't become communist until a decade after the WW II.) For democracy to take place in the West (including what remained to be achieved in the USA), the cultural symbols had to begin to fall away. Structuralists saw this happening and many dislike the developments in the contemporary world that have caused cultures to lose their identities. Shedding cultural symbols was easy in the United States, where the impress of Britain could easily be denied and where artists such as Williams and Stevens were attempting to create an American literature. In fact, Northrop Frye went so far as to say that the USA may have indeed created its own literature (43-44). Though it has been argued that the world is being Americanized, that is not so if one means a culture adopting American or Western symbols. What is Western is the lack of permanent metaphors or concrete symbols. The West has come to embrace change only.

In Europe, identity had expressed itself in distinct, individual symbols for centuries, and not simply for and by the elite, though most forcefully by them for sure. To some both inside and outside it, the European Union today may appear to be a stew of symbols. The significance of poets and populations responding to this circumstance is their questioning or abandoning of historical narratives and cultural symbols as sacred texts, as well as their embracing—or at least acknowledging—the function of the formative imagination as the *adapter for* or as the *threshold to* contingency. The shedding of cultural symbols in Europe appears to be both difficult and yet urgent. Immigrant and indigenous peoples feel their core cultural values—ones that symbols represent—threatened. This includes the values within the current zeitgeists of each group. Immigrant populations and indigenous citizens will need to shed cultural symbols, though it may be difficult.

The response to the identity crisis in the West meant a victory for the merchant class or capitalism over the aristocracy, church, and even the state. It also meant that Modernism and its Freudian attempt at a therapeutic embracing and exploring of symbols were not going to be

effective in societies and the marketplace, even with a last minute, half-hearted effort to educate the masses. Capitalism and technology brought the need for perpetual social change. When a global society's experience is continuous change, history and symbols do not address the experience. Myth does not have time to form. When a society respects change as its paradigm, it must embrace chance, contingency. Tradition no longer projects the illusion of holding time still; nor do totems, creation myths, or symbols suffice to describe shared experience. In fact, shared experience is fractured. Only metaphor and irony address society with a nimbleness worthy of chance and rapid change, not necessarily with therapeutic intentions, but with an ability to manage that experience, or perhaps create new descriptions of it.

Richard Rorty tells us that the only effective philosophical way of addressing our situation is "to redescribe lots and lots of things in new ways, until you have created a pattern of linguistic behavior which will tempt the rising generation to adopt it, thereby causing them to look for appropriate new forms of nonlinguistic behavior [...] to drop the idea of 'intrinsic nature,' [...] to face up to the *contingency* of the language we use" (Rorty 9). Here he brings change and chance to language, recognizing its metamorphic powers, bringing Kuhn and Wittgenstein together. In doing so, he acknowledges intellectual history as the history of metaphor, an explanation unlike the one of an evolutionary biologist. However, he also goes on to explain that new epochs in art and science happen when someone notices that two descriptions conflict and then invents a replacement (12-16). Rorty implies that symbols may be used, but only when the replacement metaphor is adopted by society.

I am suggesting that we may be in an epoch of Western languages redescribing via paralogy, using new images and metaphors in an attempt to find *perhaps*—and only perhaps—replacement symbols, or to rid the world of metaphysics and foster the embracing of contingency. Due to capitalism and its offshoots of globalization and multiculturalism, symbols will not hold for any culture. The period known as postmodern, if described in Darwinian language, may be a generation producing many mutations into its cultural ecology, many metaphors, and may continue until there is a world literature that fills the definition that Goethe famously left blank. This idea runs counter to the view of the left that sees globalization as a kind of social Darwinism. Though my sympathies are there, the West's momentum is not abating, even during major economic troubles. With the continued loss of languages, the adoption of English for business, and the lack of a counter-weight against globalization, I see the possibility eventually of one tongue. That language might be called English, but I would bet that we would not recognize it just as we have trouble recognizing Old or even Middle English.

I have chosen poems from two poets all the rage in America, if "all the rage" might continue to be applied to poetry: Jorie Graham and Charles Bernstein. The poems that I was able to access via the internet are "Prayer" and "In Particular." The first poem is a redescription of religious and cultural symbols. It attempts to explain a daily religious ritual in Darwinian terms. And the second is an attempt to abandon cultural symbols and metaphors of any kind.

Jorie Graham's poem "Prayer" offers an example of poetry's evolving away from religious symbols. The poem seems to be apologizing for religious symbols, given that the fish possesses symbolic value as well in Christianity as in Darwinian thought. The symbol is pivotal, moving from religious metaphysics to Enlightenment. Though the poem uses the prayer as a symbol for culture, it attempts to explain the gesture as no more than a cultural unifier and as futile in the light of evolution. The poem uses fish, minnows' coordinated yet ineffective movements in water, as metaphors for human prayer to illustrate how the current, a pun here, moves the fish in directions they do not necessarily want to go. They cannot create the current;

however, they are changed by it. The speaker expresses faith in the fact that they will all move together and be changed together:

[...] [...] without the
way to *create* current, making of their unison (turning, re-
infolding,
entering and exiting their own unison in unison) making of themselves a
visual current, one that cannot freight or sway by
minutest fractions the water's downdrafts and upswirls, [...]
[...] (Poets.Org)

By putting humans with the rest of the animal kingdom, Graham is transforming the great symbols of Christian religion and its cultures that had placed humans closer to God. Metaphor and irony are her tools. God as spotlight on humans is not mentioned, nor are there humans in the poem, except for the narrator. The minnows function as metaphors for all of us.

[...][...] a real current though mostly
invisible sending into the visible (minnows) arrowing
motion that forces change—
this is freedom. This is the force of faith. Nobody gets
what they want. Never again are you the same. The longing
is to be pure. What you get is to be changed. [...]
[...]
(Poets.Org)

Here Graham highlights the psychology of religions in a manner that is almost Nietzschean in its implications. In the will to power, all the horde gets is the will but not the power. What the horde or the slaves to religions get is “to be changed,” but changed together one assumes. The narrator of the poem also tells us:

[...]
I cannot of course come back. Not to this. Never.
It is a ghost posed on my lips. Here: never.
(Poets.Org)

The narrator and the fish must move with the current and are changed, never able to be who they were before. Even the way in which the words are typed out in the last sentence of the

poem tells the reader how (s)he forced to move on, even against the strength of the colon:
“Here: never.”

The shift from religious symbolism to Enlightenment symbols and metaphors moves a faith in the miracle that a school of minnows will stir their own current into minnow current events. The shift is one toward recognition of contingency and despair, with no hope except for the cultural change that unity, communion brings the school. We learn by one more poet that the dead science of religion has been subsumed by the language of physical science. We learn that the poet is one bridging religious faith to the Enlightenment, not a terribly revolutionary task, but one illustrative of my point. We learn the divide between the frontier of sciences and the domain of logic. The poem does not further assist evolution towards contemporary secular culture. Nor does it explain the movement from religious cultural symbols to the postmodern world via sciences and the Enlightenment.

There are many examples of post-symbol poems, especially among the younger generation. However, examples of playful mediation and of the removal of cultural symbols can more particularly be found in Charles Bernstein’s poetry. His poem “In Particular,” published online in *Jacket Magazine*, attempts to envelop the globe as well as to remain local and particular to his style of post-symbol poetry. The poem resists stereotypes but keeps a pedestrian tone to its list-form conceit. It tempts the reader at least as much as Williams’ poetry did with its relying so heavily on a red wheelbarrow beside white chickens. The title itself boldly points the reader away from the idea of symbol and metaphor. However, the reader’s imagination will compose metaphors with little help. The reader is confronted with a list of what seems to be particular examples of what we do not know because the sentences appear to be incomplete fragments. The list of people along with their objects lacks verbs that could create metaphors. It begins giving the reader multicultural understanding:

A black man waiting at a bus stop

A white woman sitting on a stool

A Philippino eating a potato

A Mexican boy putting on shoes

[...]

(*Jacket 19*)

Not until the reader gets to “A Hindu hiding in Igloo” does (s)he question the list of particulars. At this point, the reader is moved from the outside world of what might have been a 360-degrees or global description in a particular spot to the poet’s inner environment. It is at this point that the poet begins the joy of his dance through aporia after aporia: “A Christian lady with toupee/[...]/A barbarian with beret/[...]/A Beatnik writing a limerick/[...]/An Armenian rowing to Amenia/[...]/A Mongolian imitating Napoleon/[...]” (*Jacket 19*), and so on until he sets the reader back down:

[...]

A Mongolian chiropodist at a potluck

A Sao Paulo poet reflecting on deflection

A white man sitting on stool
A black woman waiting at bus stop
(Jacket 19)

Where a white woman and a black man begin the poem, a white man and black woman end it, replacing them. Did the narrator, after his/her dervish dance overwhelmed the reader with particulars, return to find a bus had come and gone? Or did the narrator get the gender wrong on two counts upon approaching two of his subjects? Inquiring minds want to know. Bernstein seems to know that the Earth's ecology is evolving through the growing populations who are more mobile and seems to witness the impact of their particular presences in a world of mixed cultures. His human species seem to stir their own current events for themselves, and the poem gives this impression without explicit action on the part of the humans.

The poem reminds this particular reader of one half of an André Breton list poem. By one half, I mean each line is broken, a fragment so that we get a list, but the surreal metaphor is missing. There are no verbs, simply qualified nouns, subjects of possible sentences, we may suppose. One half of the poem is particular to Bernstein's imagination and the other particular to the reader's. By constructing the poem of often unlikely particulars, Bernstein exaggerates the once-in-a-lifetime, the Now of the sublime fleeting with each itemization. The poem bridges the gulf between the dynamism of postcolonial, multicultural society, contemporary theory that embraces both deferment of judgment through aporia, and the West's value for the individual person. Graham's poem brings the reader through Modernism. Bernstein's poem, stripped as it is of cultural symbols, brings the reader into the ecology of contemporary life and poetics with its reminder that language is a medium and that the reader is expected to interact with the medium, as the reader does with his/her eco-system. Bernstein places us among the humanity in the poem in such a way that we may experience and celebrate our multicultural responsibilities as we do in the greater ecology.

One may find the shedding of cultural symbols in the development of my poetry as well. My book *Apple in the Monkey Tree* is meant to be an irreverent examination of the mixing of scientific language into the Greco-Judeo-Christian mythologies. Though a poet's discussion of intentions distracts from the reader's interactive play that the work provides, the reflective nature of this essay allows me to do so, briefly. The book's introductory poem printed in full below attempts to superimpose the limbs of the tree of the Old and New Testaments into the palms of Darwin's monkey, while referring to Greek mythology, Freudian ideas, and an Eastern mindset. I hoped the genius (the human monkey) would be the apple and the tree. The "Blessed metamorphosis" is supposed to be Eastern in thinking and Postmodernist in its suggestion of contingency:

The Monkey in the Apple Tree

Even though the genius continues
to hang on a limb and loneliness
remains a peck of liver, in the apple tree
the monkey's eyes are at last, moon and sun.

The blue ball, once a plain's guarded secret,
bounds beyond the zoo of fingertips:
The most precious desire remains to be picked,

our history, a basket of polished gourds.

The trunk from which the Bible is made
was erected by the libidos
of average television service personnel,
who crane their figures to witness space launches.

Branches that lift the cans of beer
sacrifice hair and clarity of grip
for random acts of charity
and the curiosity of human position.

Fruit and thorns will always be with us,
but now we examine the black fields of energy:
Tufts of gravity; mite-ish waves;
sacks of flesh too soon too heavy for bone.

Oh forsaken, God cants, “up your mantric spine
with conscious nests.” One by one
our delusions fly away. Blessed metamorphosis
absorbs the sweat of our brows.

(The Apple in the Monkey Tree, 3)

Later poems in the book attempt to continue where the first poem leaves off. “Circus Act” (p. 73ref.?) is one of the last poems, and it suggests that when mythological trees of the world have been climbed and imitated by humans, we can honor our animal natures and re-cognize the wilderness via postmodern lenses. A poem 15 to 20 years later in the development of my work is perhaps an example of the fish losing its cultural significance as the poem defines poetry. The poem was written as an interactive nature poem where the poet relies on signifiers and aporia only. It is interactive because it invites the reader to move from the restaurant seat to a plate on a table.

Menu

Fish hook with line cut
(RightHandPointing, 4)

Artists employing an interactive poetic—one that rejoins performance art with experience in visual art and poetry to form a more ecological whole—may at least bring more balance to mediation. The work being done in the sciences to understand the aporian gap between human languages and animal world may aid in eliminating mediation someday. Who knows? Slavoj Žižek, in *The Indivisible Remainder*, imagines quantum physics to deconstruct nature and possibly change the paradigm, if not solve the problem that mediation makes, for humans—his tongue firmly in his cheek (Žižek 218-220). Until then or until a more unified world culture perhaps, poetry’s ecology is one of agility and one in flux: post-symbol. Just as the Earth’s resources are being expended and its climate threatened via an economy’s perpetual motion, so poetry responds and anticipates, attempting to redescribe or at least agilely aid the formative imaginations of readers. There is little time or space and little relevance for religious and cultural symbols, unless we develop global symbols, a global culture. Through capitalism’s globalization much will be lost. We can only hope that other areas of diversity will find meaning. ntil a global

culture emerges , the signifier and the writer who reminds readers of the aporia between him/her and the signified, remain—the only useful tools of the poet, the tool also known as the gap and the tool in which possibility resides.

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