

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

On Poe

Robert Wood · Wednesday, August 1st, 2018

I was a historian before I was a poet. Or to put it better, I was trained as a historian even as I was a waiter, a teaching assistant, a union official, a cultural liaison officer, a researcher, a kitchen-hand. The sediment of that disciplinary past is in me, and not only in how I read texts now, but also in a philosophy of history as a field of thinking itself. It is history all the way down, for the past forms the basis of our world. But, one must have an imagination; one must have a poetics to make sense of that in a way that is meaningful. It cannot simply be an arcade of knowledge as if the encyclopaedia entry was the sum of human achievement and there was only a dry social science without beauty, style or creativity. How we approach the past, our frame when we look at our ancestors, matters for what we encounter. This is the creativity of our source base.

There was a video I was fond of when I was studying history that showed Michel Foucault in conversation with Noam Chomsky in 1971 where they debate nothing less than ‘human nature’. There is the irony that Foucault refuses to say what his starting point is and yet he found it further and further back before finally settling on the Ancient Greeks in *History of Sexuality* volumes 2 and 3. Chomsky however wants to be specific, is less Socratic and answers the question rather than turning it back to the interviewer, his interlocutor or the audience. This is despite the fact that in his linguistics ‘universal grammar’ seems mysteriously ahistorical, like the ‘invisible hand’ that cannot see its own digits. What is striking though is less what they say and more the historical moment itself – an audience of serious young men with mutton chops and camel corduroys nodding in agreement, how they push their large aviator glasses up their noses, the way the camera pans the room stopping on green turtlenecks and tweed blazers with angular shoulder pads. It is those details that mark its time. That is how we know what an era is – in the lexicon of the body itself rather than in ideas alone.

That attention to detail, that history of minutiae, is what matters for poets too. The focused forms of domestic scenes from Sylvia Plath to Anne Carson, the quotidian aspects of pleasure from Layli Long Soldier to Bhanu Kapil. That local flavour is what makes it different, what makes it distinct and of interest. As Daniel Chambliss writes in ‘The Mundanity of Excellence’, it is the attention to detail that distinguishes people at every level not the general facts that make up most of the habits. This might be the particular turn of phrase, the curious punctuation mark, the bringing together of influences that seem oppositional somehow. But if there is no agreed upon tradition, or the very shallow soil of superficial engagement, what will grow there? What is the compost needed to plant the seed that can become a walnut tree or jarrah grove? That is where framing, where *how* we read, matters for recognising the archive’s infinity. That is what poetics adds to history.

Seeing history in that different way has been something first stood out for me with Edgar Allen Poe. His era seemed liked a whole world. It is a catalogue of a moment that covers animals, sickness, health, media, the literary, the gamut of experience that sits like an image of the gothic itself. In the poems, there is the layering of facts into palimpsest, there are surreal swerves of logic and conjoining of experience, there is wry humour to undercut the darkness, there are curious uses of vowels as if to sound out the stops, starts and micro gestures of the language as a whole. What is important though is that it continues the epic quality of local identity, that it makes the world from one moment, which might not otherwise see itself.

For a time, we lived on Edgar Allen Poe Street which is the far west end of 84th Street on the Upper West Side of New York. It felt, for a time, like home. I could be anonymous there, just another person in the city who could go on their way. But, I am not from there, just squatting for the time being, reading a lot of books, which, of course, includes Poe himself. He is attentive to the detail in a way that reminds me of the Russians from Tolstoy to Dostoevsky to Turgenev, Pasternak and Gorky. But he does not 'get' life itself – too morose for my sunny moment and place that I belong to. And yet I want to thank Poe for what is possible when there is that linguistic attention to detail, to when the length of the line or the rhyme is considered. I want to suggest this if only because it may provide a philosophy for his writing about time itself. It does not even have to be avant garde poetry or the Russians, though he would do well to read Dmitry Golynko and his new social epic, or maybe even Daniil Kharms and his micro portraits of surreal life. There is a dark strain that Poe might consider out of his time that avoids his surliness as a critic and a commentator riled by jealousy. Even now, it could simply be to let him in on prose poems that I can relate to even though I grew up in the suburbs of Australia so far from New York and Poe's cloudy world. I want him to read Amy Hilhorst's 'Classroom Pets 1994' and for him to chuckle on how even out here in the sun bleached world we live in, there is black comedy, to think we have followed him a little when she writes:

*Year Two Green got classroom pets:
wrinkled, writhing forms with
salmon-pink tails and milky fur;
a pair of mice—one boy, one girl.*

*We thrust pellets on them
with texta-stained hands, as they
ran on wheels that went nowhere.
I wondered if we were caged,
like them, and if they thought so too.*

*We voted on names in secret ballot:
our teacher counted paper scraps to
announce that the female would be
Jasmine, like the princess from Aladdin.
I stared into garnet-red eyes,
which were more like the snake staff
Jafar used to hypnotise.*

*Within days, her fur was slick with sweat
as her belly drooped with new absence.
Seven babies hung from her teats, draining*

*milk and turning her, it seemed,
more translucent with every swig.*

*I couldn't hold the hairless things,
thinking they looked like
dismembered pinky toes.
Repulsed, I feared I'd drop them,
that they'd break, or worse,
multiply and carpet the floor,
making us wade
through slithering coral.*

*One day the babies were gone, and
Jasmine sagged, lumpy and full.
'If mother mice are stressed,
sometimes they eat their young,'
our teacher said, as we sat before her,
cross-legged, stunned.*

This is the life cycle we have witnessed. Historians do not have to read poetry, and poets do not have to read history. But a statement like that relies on common sense definitions of what are blurry fields to begin with. They are, after all, types of language games that we play with, that we can see as being part of our lessons still and as much a part of life as the mice that eat their children when the students are out of the classroom.

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