

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Privileged Politics

Robert Wood · Wednesday, June 17th, 2015

There have long been conversations about the politics of reading and teaching the work of particular poets. This is not only in the negative – who not to teach – but also in the positive – who to teach. For the most part this question of politics in poetry has oriented itself around macro issues. These are the big picture, structural, ideological concerns (language, feminism, Communism) even as micro issues (network and who knows who) are important too. Indeed, thinking in the abstract, thinking of History, is married with the very local thinking of the face-to-face. For example, I teach Blake rather than the other Romantics due in part to my own teachers' preferences for him. I read Jerome Rothenberg because I heard him live. The macro and the micro constantly interact to create the conditions in which we read and teach poetry.

CA Conrad's recent *Harriet* blog post for the Poetry Foundation '[From Whitman to Walmart](#)' makes two major observations – the first is about the politics of Whitman and the second is about sleeping in Walmart carparks. The comments on Whitman are, surely, the most controversial, for Conrad stated 'f***k these Whitman poems' more than once, and there have been a couple of responses to him.

Conrad's opposition to Whitman is because of Whitman's racist views concerning African and Indigenous Americans. This stand, of speaking truth to apparent power, is made through a voice that considers itself marginal. Indeed, Conrad is not Whitman in the syllabi, economy, circuit of American poetry. Whitman has a national grandeur, a totemic towering position as a 'grandfather' to American verse. He presides over it in an idiosyncratic fashion. Conrad, by contrast, though busy and present, is a peripheral figure. Despite blogging for 'official verse culture' and despite being the winner of Banff, Pew, Radar and other fellowships, he has no institutional basis. Conrad is part of a poetry middle class sandwiched between the Ashberys, Grahams, Herreras, Keilors and the amateur café readers who spend their Saturdays with coffee and sonnets. Conrad is not yet major, let alone Historic.

There are several observations we could make concerning Whitman – that he was from his era, that his politics is separate from his poetry, that he reads badly today. These are essentially to excuse him for views we consider wrong. However, to the core question of whether we should read or teach Whitman (or Eliot or Pound or Oppen)? We should not throw the baby out with the bathwater. We can read to learn what to negate and in some ways we can read to separate out poetry from politics. Representation is not reality and I do not only eat carrot sticks and drink green juices. Sometimes poetry that is bad for you is necessary. Whitman, for Conrad, might fall into that category. So too, might a whole host of Communists (Hewett, Dalton, Guillen, Pavese) that I might

find appealing precisely for their politics.

The poetry though should be foremost. Politics is supplemental to the poetry even as Robin Blaser was right to suggest ‘the public realm is always political’. Poets though make poor politicians – they are not strategic, they do not change the material conditions of every day life, they are too idealistic.

The second aspect of Conrad’s blog is more revealing. As he writes:

I hope by now we have all heard about the conditions of low pay and long work hours for Walmart employees without the protection of unions. But there are even worse working conditions for the many people making Walmart products in Mexico and China.

We have all heard about it, but what do we do about it? Indeed what are the politics of knowing something and failing to act, or rather, being so naïve in regard to strategy that you fail to make a material difference? In other words, is it better not to know any better or to know and not do something? As a former unionist we would have recognised the sympathies of a fellow traveller, but with Conrad this is just tourism to his former home country. Conrad concludes his blog with tips for sleeping in Walmart carparks. These give him a certain cultural capital, which is not to deny their ‘truth content’ as anecdotes, but what emerges may not be a successful political intervention.

And yet this is to say nothing of the poetry. Conrad’s long poetry project may yet be an important contribution to American letters. Judgement of that will not be solely determined by politics, but by a complex interaction between aesthetics and a range of other concerns. In reading and teaching poetry one inevitably comes up with certain justifications, with reasons for and against certain poets and poems that one feels are important. To participate in those language games is a privilege that not everyone has.

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