

holding patterns

temporary poetics in contemporary poetry

daniel mcguiness

HOLDING PATTERNS

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*Temporary Poetics
in Contemporary Poetry*

Daniel McGuiness

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For
My Wife
and in memory of
My Mother

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INTRODUCTION

I

Measures have to do with how we think about things. One of the ways we think about things is in poems. One of the ways we think about poems is in criticism. Contemporary literary criticism and contemporary poetry in America have, for some time, seemed to be at cross purposes. In fact, formal (read academic) literary critics writing in our time seldom address the poems of their contemporaries. While structuralists and similar schools seek terms, generalizations and whole systems to account for and to understand poems, poets themselves repeatedly assert that each of their poems is its own poetic, that no system applies to their writing. It is in the prose statements of poets—in essays, in interviews, and reviews—that a reader can find the most direct and simplest affirmations of an aesthetic that, while hard to define, is easy to see in practice.

This book attempts a criticism sympathetic with the contentions of those poets by avoiding a priori terminology, that is, by avoiding the appliances of criticism, and by self-consciously persisting in close reading of texts as the directing force of its argument, as, in fact, the sole component of its argument. Such categories as this book constructs in its second part (poems about paintings, poems with typographical eccentricities, poems about the sea, and poems about politics) involve a common thread, the analogy of the pulse beat asserted in part one, to support rather than subvert those contentions.

In its last chapters this book addresses first books of poems by Amy Clampitt and Denis Johnson and midcareer books of poems by Jorie Graham and Charles Wright in order to focus on the recurrence both of the pulse-beat analogy and those subject matters outlined in Part II. Thus, the book attempts to assert a continuity between the prose statements and the poetic practices of both new and established contemporary poets. By attempting to remain descriptive rather than prescriptive, the book tries to evoke the essential element and quintessential spirit of all of the poems treated in it: The measure is always the poem.

II

Gerard Manley Hopkins was a good Jesuit. Therefore he only seemed like a radical when he was simply investigating the limits of a system. Since God made the rain, rain and God should be praised, he thought, but rain alone goes under the

microscope in the laboratory. Hopkins was also a good Victorian and a good scholar; he once entranced a duck to see what it would do:

April 27, 1871

Mesmerized a duck with chalk lines drawn from her beak sometimes level and sometimes forwards on a black table. They explain that the bird keeping the abiding offscape of the hand grasping her neck fancies she is still down and cannot lift her head as long as she looks at the chalk line, which she associates with the power that holds her. This duck lifted her head at once when I put it down on the table without chalk. But this seems inadequate. It is most likely the fascinating instress of the straight white stroke.¹

When you take the pressure off, patterns persist. If that duck could write and wanted to publish a book about poetry, I would hope she would write this book—which attempts to speculate about what has persisted since the pressures of iambic pentameter eased for poets of our recent literary experience in America. I started this book with very few preconceptions and I have, at the end, very few conceptions. That conceptions don't have much to do with poems is one of the things I thought I knew when I began and I think I know even better now. Whenever I turned to theory in my distress these last several years, I quickly turned back to poems with relief. "Fascinating instress" stays in the ligaments fortunately and sometimes you find any excuse to keep your head down.

Therefore, this book is divided into three parts: one to ask a question, two to generate some answers, however temporary, and three to apply those answers to some new questions. Part I defines the problem by one chapter which immediately rushes into a temporary and metaphoric aesthetic only to find it works as well as any, by a second chapter, which attempts to investigate such a tactic through exegesis, and by a third chapter, which attempts to investigate such a tactic through secondary source material. That seems to me as close as one might want to come in such an endeavor to a thesis, framework, and review of the literature. Rafael Alberti, Linda Gregg, and Jorie Graham appear as focal points here.

Part II is an essentially and deliberately random investigation of what seem to me to be strategies by various contemporary poets to impose form on their writing, not necessarily as a conscious act but not necessarily as an intuitive blunder either, the purpose of which is merely to prove the multiplicity of such strategies and the danger of any generalizations one might make about them. Each of these chapters isolates a single trope that seems to restrict and inform the scope of individual poems (that is, provides a temporary analogue for traditional prosody) without solidifying into prosody. It is necessary to these poets, it seems to me, that these tropes remain almost entirely arbitrary; thus I have made no attempt to categorize, catalog, or exhaust them. However, what these tropes do have in common, at least for me, is their accidental similarity to the aesthetic of pulsation

predicated in Part I, that is, they are not just any prosodic analogues but analogues that turn you back and provide a distancing factor in and of themselves. I would not presume to propose anything more than idiosyncratic reading habits to explain any consistency or apparent consistency here. That is not the point. Other choices in Part II are just as arbitrary; each chapter tries to focus on a couple of poets while discussing each trope but I make no claim to career assessment or book reviewing here. The choices of poets like James Wright, Louise Glück, James Galvin, Robert Lowell, Carolyn Forché, or James Fenton have no more justification than those idiosyncratic reading habits before mentioned. I might say however that one reads contemporary poetry at random, as a rule, in small magazines and anthologies, one poem and one poet at a time; a poet's books are infrequent, slim, and highly selective attempts to present the larger picture of a poet's career before he or she has reached the age, prestige, or mortality status necessary to justify the publication of a collected works.

Part III attempts to use the materials of Part II in approaching two new poets and two poets in midcareer. I have chosen two first books of 1983, *The Kingfisher* by Amy Clampitt and *The Incognito Lounge* by Denis Johnson, because that year they were the books that elicited the most lively critical response generally, in addition to being the books of that year that I personally found the most intriguing. Then, I have chosen two books from 1987 by two poets with impressive records of publication and critical reception: *The End of Beauty* by Jorie Graham and *Zone Journals* by Charles Wright. I am looking for no Harold Bloom—ian anxiety of influence or Eliotic tradition here; just a continuity in the ways poets choose to put together their poems. If there seems to be an Iowa bias in the choices for representative poets here, I would not be at all surprised since I am an Iowan, with a degree from that state's university.

This book has finally nothing sweeping to say about prosody, free verse, American poetry, or poetry. All through it, I have tried most of all to retain the sense of discovery that should be the goal of any poem and any writing about such poems. I learned to love poems by reading them, with my students, with my friends, with my wife, alone. The more I read, the less I have to say except about what I see happening in the poem in front of me. I do not consider myself a critic; I consider myself a teacher. Teachers, I think, rarely have answers, agendas, or rock-solid teleologies. Good teachers spend a great deal of their time with people who are not very interested in poetry; this is, in many ways, a liberating experience. But then much about poetry in this generation has been liberating. Free verse freed me as well as the poets, but it freed us all only to take more personal responsibility for the things that happen in our poems and in our responses to poems and in our lives. The only excuse is the honesty and perseverance of our efforts. Finally form is new each time and merely a temporary subjugation of the imagination to the discipline that the world deserves. Iambic pentameter is fine if that is what you need at the time to write your poem; we are no longer the masters of the universe or even of this planet; we can no longer be so sure that anything is

necessary or even what it seems. I suppose teachers, critics, poets, students, or anybody else might all come to such conclusions, but it was those assumptions that made the pleasures of writing what follows in this book: I often surprised myself.

The fact that there is no one way to impose form on experience and call it a poem is a source of delight for me. One of the great pleasures of poetry in America right now is its volume and diversity; how wonderful it is that we will never run out of wonderful things to read and teach and talk about. We have so many good poets in America now. This has its dark side, of course: it is hard to get published and recognized, it is hard not to feel a dime a dozen, it is hard not to feel jealous of the success of others, it is hard not to retreat into the paranoia of a "school." Poets now know what athletes and teachers in America know, what it is like to have talent and ambition with few places to share it. We have a generation of young writers who have somehow come through with their sensitivity unsullied, who lead with their nerve endings, and who suffer the consequences, knowing that their vulnerability is as precious as air. There is always the danger of exhaustion and fraud in such freedom and we can take a warning such as William Bronk's to heart as we start this book:

If it is true of space that it is featureless and empty except as we limit its vastness and shape it by our occupation, the form of the cities we impose on it, the direction and location of the boundaries and roads, it is true also that our occupation is never quite successful. It is part of the same truth that the limits we set to space are always in some degree arbitrary, and the names we give it are given names not absolute ones. We are always in some degree still nowhere in an empty vastness. . . . We tire of the forms we impose upon space and the restricted identities we secure from them. We tire finally even of the act itself of imposition.²

There is no magic word and nothing comes out of the sky to give us our rewards. Gerard Manley Hopkins knew that, so he made his own words and shaped each poem with his knowledge of all other poems serving more as a warning than a guide. Like John Donne before him, Father Hopkins had the *Spiritual Exercises* of Loyola to shape his world; What could be more complete and more inadequate? Several years after he mesmerized that duck, he would write, ". . . searching nature I taste *self* but at one tankard, that of my own being."³ Is it fear or pride one reads there?

III

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Finally and most especially, this is for my wife: all of the above and more than that.

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