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SYMPOSIUM: Gay Poetry, Politics, Poetics

In recent years the BPJ has published a number of memorable poems whose beauty and boldness are inextricable from their overtly gay perspective. With that in mind, we extended an invitation to four poets whose work we admire to discuss what might constitute a gay sensibility or poetics. What follows is a much-abridged version of the email conversation that ensued. We invite you to join that conversation as it continues on our blog, the Poet's Forum, during the month of June.

—LS, JR

JC: Clearly a gay sensibility exists in poetry. There are nuances, references, and shared experiences which can be expressed in poetry that straight people will never glean, but that a gay man or woman would recognize instantly. The hetero world is so very man/woman oriented that everything it looks upon is seen through that filter. When a gay male poet writes, "We met in the park / at dusk" it means something very different than if a straight man or woman wrote it. . . . But the intense, raw pain of Paul Monette's *Love Alone: Eighteen Elegies for Rog*, to cite just one example, is simply human. There is nothing gay about the experience of losing someone you utterly love. Why is a line being drawn across human experience because that love is man/man vs. man/other?

BT: Jeff, I think you go right to the heart of the matter with ardent clarity, the matter being the question of gay poetry: What is it? Does it exist? If it does, how so? If it doesn't, then why do people act as though it does? At the heart of your response, I see you potentially arguing for a universal humanism that both trumps historical context and posits an implicit scale of value: "human" > "gay." If I choose to play devil's advocate in response to your question, please know that I don't intend to single you out. I think you're articulating a powerful question about art's relationship to political experience—a question I almost daily ask of myself and my work as a poet and critic. But I wouldn't myself say that there is "nothing gay about the experience of losing someone you utterly love" to AIDS, in the U.S., in the '80s.

Reading Monette for me now is not just to revisit my own memories of losing my partner to AIDS-related complexes in 1999—which was, to be historical about it, a very different death than it would have been had he died in the '80s. For me to read Monette in 2011 is also to be immersed in recent history that is finally just far enough away to be history: a specific era whose politics, activist actions, and emotional atmosphere were dictated and circumscribed by the very

particular cultural and economic leadership of the U.S. government, moralizing and panic-driven public attitudes toward gay male sexuality, limited medical knowledge of AIDS itself, and a paucity of ways of treating it. So while I totally understand what you mean about the universality of the loss of the beloved, the cultural and historical context at work in Monette's autobiographical poems not only leads me to read them as representative of gay experience of a certain time—it insists that I do. I think that this is Monette's particular form of literary activism: he refuses altogether the binary between "human" and "gay," but not by erasing the particulars of gay experience or the specifics of gay history. He insists that though there is no difference between "human" and "gay," the record nonetheless must stand.

Of course, I don't meant to imply that you're arguing we should erase these particulars from our writing. If your acute articulation of this question has called out my own ardency, it's because this is an issue I've worried over for a long time, the relationship between universal humanism and specific political histories—and because it's generally a contentious issue. By insisting on keeping these two terms in tension with each other rather than choosing or valuing one over the other, I do not intend to diminish literary work in any way, or to "draw a line" needlessly across human experience. To keep "human" and "gay" in tension (as, I would argue, they are in our culture) is both to point out that the lines are often already drawn for us by others and to honor the fact that sometimes these are lines drawn for battles in which we lose each other to history.

All of which is to beg the question: what is gay poetry?

JC: I wholeheartedly agree that the context of Paul Monette's work is indeed very, very gay. As you say, a gay man losing his lover to AIDS in the '80s: it doesn't get much gayer than that. However his content is not very gay at all. Imagine you are reading Monette's "No Good-byes" for the first time, without knowing who wrote it, when, or what book it is from. In the first forty lines of this forty-four line poem the poet reveals his passion, his love, his terrible loss. But nowhere are we given a hint as to the writer's sex or sexual orientation. Only in the final four lines do we get a clue: "and please let your final dream be / a man not quite your size losing the whole / world but still here combing combing / singing your secret names till the night's gone." If we replace that one little word "man" with the non-sex-specific "lover" does the poem lose its power? Is the gay poem suddenly not gay?

I have the dubious distinction of being published in *Between the Cracks: The Daedalus Anthology of Kinky Verse*, edited by badboy Gavin Dillard. Reading through the works, I am trying to ask myself, "Which poems are gay poems, and why?" Is a homoerotic poem necessarily a gay poem? If a poem about the sumptuous beauty of a female body is written by a woman, then is it gay? If the same poem were penned by a man, does that turn it suddenly straight?

I think we will have to arrive at multiple definitions of "gay poetry," one that considers context, one that considers content, one that considers the biographical poet. Can straight people write gay poetry? Or is their poetry just "gay-acting"? (Yes, I'm being a little silly here.) I think you make a very important point, Brian, when you say that "the lines are often already drawn for us by others." The straight Judeo-Muslim-Christian world has worked hard for centuries to draw the lines around gays in murderous and abusive ways. I think that a fundamentalist Christian's definition of "gay poetry" would be very different from one we came up with ourselves.

PP: It all gets pretty slippery, doesn't it? For instance, I am thinking now of a poet such as Mary Oliver, who is gay, but her poetics are decidedly not gay, are instead quite mainstream and best-selling. And then there are poets such as Tony Hoagland, who are not gay, but whose poetics could be considered quite gay (I am thinking in particular of his book *What Narcissism Means to Me*).

So, if it exists, what is a gay poetics? Apart from identity politics and activism, I would like to posit a few other aspects of a gay poetics, or a gay sensibility in poetry, if such a thing exists, and I think it does. In the same way it is hard for me to describe art, I feel like I know it when I see it. Of course, none of the following are exclusive to a gay sensibility, but together perhaps can be seen as facets of it:

1) A transgressive stance: poetry that goes against the current, that is in your face like a drag queen on a rampage (see the Stonewall Rebellion). This may include sexual content, as in Garth's poem "Portrait in Hood and Bindings" or Brian's poems in his first book, but it is also about defiance, appropriation, thievery, mash-ups, seizing the canon and turning it upside down and shaking it. I am thinking here of Adrienne Rich, Allen Ginsberg, Eileen Myles, and others.

2) A love of hidden and/or codified and/or transformed language:

word play, anagrams, erasures, redactions, dictionaries, etymologies, and ornament. I see this in the work of James Merrill, Randall Mann, Richard Howard, D. A. Powell, Mark Doty, and others. Speaking in code, or in hidden texts within texts, is not unlike the colored handkerchiefs and secret hand signals gay men (and women) have used as subterfuge to meet and match up in more closeted and discreet times.

3) An obsession with form: rhyming, palindromes, villanelles, sonnets, etc. When one's sexuality, one's life, is outside the norm, I think one can paradoxically become focused on given rules, laws, orders, systems, and the worlds they create. I am thinking here of the work of David Trinidad, Marilyn Hacker, Rafael Campo, and others.

4) A sense of humor, irony, camp: I mean really, two men (or two women) together? You've got to have a sense of humor, a well developed sense of irony, to make it work. I am thinking of Jeff's poem "Hybrid" that I chose several years ago as guest editor of *In Posse Review*. This poem could easily have been written by a straight woman, talking about a failed or unrequited relationship. Still the poem, with its amphibian metaphors, would have, in my mind, a gay sensibility. As Jerome Murphy says in his blog "For Southern Boys Who Have Considered Poetry" in a post about "What Makes a Poem Gay":

To me, for a poet to be "gay" with conceptual quote marks is a matter of imaginative dexterity—of fully exploiting the double vision bestowed by existence as a variant on the sexual norm. To be, in other words, amphibious. To be deviously sensitive to whatever borders your culture has drawn around gender and to actually enjoy those restrictions for the acts of creative subversion they allow.

GG: I second Jeff's notion that there will be—must be, should be—multiple and coexisting definitions of "gay poetry," a category that feels to me important to preserve even as any attempt to nail it down seems objectionable or unsatisfying. For instance: it's not clear to me that every work by a writer who self-identifies as queer is therefore "gay literature." I'm not sure that Auden's "Shield of Achilles" falls within my sense (but what is my sense?) of a "gay poem," and one of the most beautiful recent gay novels I know is *Call Me by Your Name*, by the straight-identified André Aciman. I want to assert that the imagination isn't limited by—that it promiscuously disregards—these kinds of fixed identities.

Nor does it seem true to me that only works with overt and clearly stated homoerotic themes or narratives qualify as “gay.” To think again of Auden: “Lay Your Sleeping Head, My Love,” one of the most beautiful poems I know, never makes explicit the fact that it was written in response to a same-sex erotic experience, yet the experience described is particular (which is not quite to say exclusive) to a species of non-normative and devalued sexual encounter characteristic of gay lives in a certain place and time. I don’t think this limits the poem, which expresses sentiments that surely are “universal,” if there are such sentiments, but I would resist any attempt to lift the poem from the specificity of experience it describes or to claim that its gayness doesn’t in some crucial sense matter. Limiting the poem’s resonance to its local circumstance does a violence to the poem; so does grasping hold of something we identify as universal at the expense of historical specificity.

The tension in poetry between “local” and “universal,” between “context” and “content,” is a vivifying one, and I find myself resistant to most attempts to resolve it. Surely this flickering between local and universal is among the pleasures of art, and surely we don’t have to claim one of them as essence and dismiss the other as accident. So, Jeff, I can absolutely agree with you about seeing Monette’s book as a universal cry of grief and rage, but I can’t think that universality comes despite the specifically gay content of the poems, which I fear would require valuing lines that can be read without the specificities of gendered eroticism while devaluing the book’s specifically queer content. And it does seem to me full of specifically queer content, and quite assertively so.

None of this gets me any closer to a definition, even a partial and personal one, of “gay poetry.” And there’s a reason I’m resistant to articulating such a definition. A definition of gay poetry would require (wouldn’t it?) a definition of gay identity itself, and such definitions seem to me unlikely and undesirable when both things—gay identities, gay poetics—keep proliferating and transforming, taking on new circumstances and shapes, promiscuously refusing to be fixed.

BT: I would like to add a question about our involvement with/relationship to gay community politics and activism: how involved have we been? If so, has that involvement inflected our work and/or our conception of the purpose of the work? And has the inflection changed over time? If not, how has that shaped our conception of the work?

I ask because my own initial sense of poetry's relationship to politics was conflicted. I came out before I began writing or studying poetry, but reading gay and lesbian poetry was a big part of my coming out, given that initially it was easier and less frightening for me in small-town Alabama to find queer books than to seek out queer people. Joan Larkin's and Carl Morse's anthology *Gay and Lesbian Poetry in Our Time* was very important to me, likely more as a social document than as poetry—but that distinction didn't matter much to me then. The work they gathered together answered a lot of questions I had about what it meant to "be gay" in the U.S. in the late twentieth century, and the experiences the poems recounted mirrored many of my own.

When in my junior year of college I came to poetry, I also came to activism, and it was then that I most acutely experienced a conflict: "political poetry" was verboten in the creative writing classes I took, where it was universally ridiculed for its alleged lack of craft and bald utilitarianism. On the one hand, I felt that my education asked me to disavow my connection to the work that had helped me and others so much; on the other, I was actually interested in the work of the poets I was learning about in school, though it was hard to miss the fact that all of them (except E. Bishop) were straight. So rather than writing directly about politics or activist action, I took to writing about queer desire and sex, subjects invariably seen by straight people as political anyway; it was a way of keeping myself from being shamed by my education while still insisting on sexuality as a charged and necessary subject matter.

JC: I have never intentionally entered poetically into gay community politics and activism. When I was "out, loud, and proud" in my early twenties, I did join the local Gay Democrats and marched on Washington in 1987 with hundreds of thousands of amazing others. But none of it ever directly entered my poetry. Anytime I have tried to write poetry with a political agenda in mind it has invariably failed, coming across as monodimensional and didactic. When I think of "gay activist poetry," Adrienne Rich comes to mind along with Judy Grahn, whose work I adore. Then, of course, Allen Ginsberg and on down even to Walt Whitman. I have written many political poems (anti-war, mostly), and I am rabid about many gay political issues—especially the continual denial of gay marriage. But I've never pushed my poetry into that route, mostly, I think, because I would be preaching to the converted.

PP: I think time and place and circumstances definitely play a role in what poems speak to us at a given moment. In response to the AIDS crisis, 9/11, and the war in Iraq, people turned to poetry in droves—for solace, for answers, for wisdom, for an expression of deep feeling, for remembering. Perhaps a certain kind of poem best suited those times. But rather than prizing one form of address over another, I see it as a dialectic, or a continuum, and where we locate ourselves (as a reader or writer) changes over time—in a gay context, from the more narrative and/or activist mode to the more aesthetic and/or oblique. You see this in the greater poetry community, as Ron Silliman describes in his binary of post-avant and School of Quietude. I do though fear sometimes that shying away too much from being “out” in one’s poetry, from including the more narrative and autobiographical elements, might be a step back into the closet, rather than a step forward.

GG: The question of the relationship between literature and activism has been a vexed one for me. When I first came out I did so almost entirely without books and the possible models for self-fashioning they might have offered, and I remember the great relief and gratitude I felt when I first encountered novels like *A Boy’s Own Story* and *Giovanni’s Room*. In college I encountered the first poets I fell in love with (all of them women: Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, Denise Levertov, Lucille Clifton), who thrilled me with their commitment to activism—by which I mean their embrace of the utilitarian aims derided in Brian’s graduate workshops, as in mine—and with their aggressive assertion of identity. At this same time I was asserting my own identity as aggressively as possible, or so it seems to me now, a project of which the first poems I wrote were a part. (As a sophomore in college I sent a packet of those poems, my first submission and all of them awful, to *BPJ*. It was returned to me with the standard rejection note, along with, quite rightly, a single word neatly handwritten in the bottom corner: “No.”)

My training in literature led me away from this kind of assertiveness, teaching me to value instead an ambivalence and ambiguity that seem to make certain kinds of aggressive assertions difficult to sustain. This led, for several years, to a rejection of those poets I first loved, which was also of course a rejection of that earlier self that loved them. Poetry came to seem to me something above activism, an arena for the exercise of uncertainty and self-doubt and shame, all of them incompatible with a political program associated above all with

pride. I don't think these are false virtues for poetry to claim, and my sense of poetry (of the poetry I most value) has long cherished it as intimate, self-doubting, even self-undoing, speech, open to history but cut off from public programs of all kinds.

But this sense of things has shifted since I left the academy and the Northeast, where it was easy to feel little sense of urgency around an LGBT political agenda. Teaching high school students, I've been surprised by how quickly that sense of urgency has returned, and by my own sense of rage when seeing my students' fear, their anger, and the shame they have been made to feel. My gay students here in Sofia, Bulgaria, grow up in an environment where coming out is all but impossible, where powerful public figures warn of "faggots" on mainstream news programs and where last summer a man was killed in Borisova Gradina, Sofia's largest park, by nationalists who said they were "cleaning up the queers." Every time I go into the center, I emerge from the Metro to see, graffiti-ed on a wall in front of me, ПЕДАЛ = ПОДЧОВЕК (faggot = subhuman).

Teaching young people generally, and especially teaching them here, has made me consider again the place of assertiveness in literature, the presence of which, of course, may largely be less a question of text than of reader. I teach gay writers now for their literary qualities, for their beauties and ambivalences, and also for what they assert, above all for their insistence upon the full dignity of gay lives, even or especially when that insistence requires a raised voice.

I recently read Mark Doty's poem "Homo Will Not Inherit" with my poetry elective here, a class that includes students from 10th to 12th grades. In its formal and imagistic deftness, the poem argues (and if the argument has become banal it hasn't in any way triumphed) that the distinction between assertiveness and aesthetics is in no way final and may in fact be facile. Doty's poem is an activist text, and I have no doubt that it has helped me live my life, giving eloquent voice to necessary assertion, or that it has helped my students. It is also a poem that continues to command our attention as its historical moment passes. And so it presents me with a challenge: to articulate an aesthetic that acknowledges the value of its particular assertiveness as consonant with the other virtues I claim as the special province of literary speech.