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Poetry shall not serve: Poetry and Political Resistance

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ABSTRACT: The term resistance literature should be applied to all forms of poetry that voice opposition to oppression and not just, as Barbara Harlow defended, those engaged in the anti-colonial fight of the sixties. Consequently, this essay looks at poems by Langston Hughes, Fredrick Seidel, Adrienne Rich and Suheir Hammad, as clear examples of how poetry resists political, racial, and economic oppression.
KEYWORDS: Resistance Poetry, Political Poetry, Langston Hughes, Fredrick Seidel, Adrienne Rich, Suheir Hammad

RESUMO: O conceito de literatura de resistência deve ser usado para designar todas as formas de poesia que se insurgem contra a opressão e não, como sugerido por Barbara Harlow, limitado apenas à poesia da luta anti-colonial dos anos sessenta do século vinte. Neste ensaio examinam-se alguns poemas de Langston Hughes, Fredrick Seidel, Adrienne Rich e Suheir Hammad como exemplos nítidos de como a poesia resiste a opressão quer seja, política, racial, ou económica.
PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Poesia e Resistência, Poesia Política, Langston Hughes, Fredrick Seidel, Adrienne Rich, Suheir Hammad

Two pernicious fallacies seem to have taken hold in contemporary society: one, that the Humanities in general, or literature in particular, and especially poetry, would have become irrelevant to the polity because of their seemingly lack of productive value. The other, that poetry would have become so estranged from social conditions as to represent little more than a narcissistic absorption of the individual selves mired in their petty daily

routines. It is hard to explain how it was possible for these views to arise, let alone come to dominate public opinion, even if in the current state of savage capitalism clearly anything that falls out of an immediate profit scheme tends to be seen as valueless. But the myopic nature of such opinions cannot be laid to blame solely at the door of the neocon goons and populist vampires that have sprung to the fore in the limelight of television screens all over the West in the last decade. Much of the blame also applies to us, in the Humanities, for failing to make clear, and announce widely, how fundamental for democracy, indeed even for those so-prized individual liberties the far right keeps harping about, the Humanities in general, literature and poetry in special, are. For it has always been one of the roles of literary representation and of the poetic voice to speak to power, that is, to denounce the abuses of power that constantly threaten to engulf human societies. And yet, as David Lister noted, citing the UK's Arts Council Report on Poetry from 1996 – the first such major survey – "'The public has a problem with the image of poetry. It was often perceived as out-of-touch, gloomy, irrelevant, effeminate, high-brow and elitist'" (Lister 1996). The report's suggestion, to focus more on forms such as song lyrics, rap, and limericks and greeting card verses, as a way of being more in touch with the public or of adding more social relevance to poetry was as misguided as unsound. For poetry, its detractors notwithstanding, is as vital as ever in denouncing the ills of society and enabling hope towards a better future.

Poetry was always engaged in political resistance, whether one invokes the Greek classics or thinks about the latest performance act, which is not to say that all poetry is political. But the dissenting voice of Antigone, calling sovereign power to account is one that has been repeated through the ages. Barbara Harlow, in her classic study, *Resistance Literature* (Harlow 1987) focused almost exclusively on literature engaged in resistance to colonial oppression. This was understandable at the time, since so little attention had been paid to those works central to the anti-colonial struggle. However, Harlow's reiterated wish to restrict the definition of resistance literature to works engaged in anti-colonial struggle and new nation building in the Third World seems unnecessarily reductive. In an interview given in 1998 Harlow defended her views thus:

> One of the questions we started this conversation with was resistance literature. I actually think that my definition of resistance literature is that it is a very site and history specific

> literature. Resistance literature was written in the context of organized resistance movements and national liberation struggles.
>
> There are no more national liberation struggles. There are no more organized resistance movements. There is no more resistance literature. There are other kinds of literature, just as there are other kinds of struggles. But that one is over, as a literature it is closed. (Harlow 1998)

Resistance is not a closed-off term or concept and it would not make sense to restrict it in the terms Harlow suggests. Clearly, all poetry, all literature, is site and history specific. And, although one can understand the desire to circumscribe the peculiar events linked to anti-colonialism and decolonization, it would be wrong to see them as unique. Not only is the world still going through the convolutions of the post-independence, post-imperial period, but in an important sense, what might have appeared specific to the given struggles in Africa and Asia at the end of the sixties and seventies of the previous century, has come around and is as marking for the former colonial powers. The reign of fear that has taken over much of the West, either in direct relation to war or terrorism, or to constant and seemingly endless financial crisis has also created many conditions in which the struggles for freedom typical of the independence movements are rapidly becoming an issue for citizens of the established democracies of the West, be it the United States in its late imperial excesses, or the European Union, in its decadent inability to even preserve the rights that had been fought for by previous generations. Without any alarmism, and recognizing that for now, even though under mounting threat, democracy has managed to retain some of its primary features, it must be said that social injustice is becoming far more widespread and that even what one had thought were unalienable rights still have to be defended and fought for. Xenophobia escalates, fear rises, intolerance and segregation are becoming common; war mongering, the erection of borders and the creation of detention centers, all of these are constant facets of political life in the West that threaten its very foundations. As a mere example one could look at the struggle currently underway in the United Kingdom, in which the Home Secretary, Theresa May, has publicly announced her desire to withdraw her country from the European Convention on Human Rights (Wagner 2001). Literature has an active role in denouncing such deformities of democracy and in resisting them. And when it does, it clearly should be seen as resistance literature, a term that I am claiming for all

literary texts that rise in indignation against abuses of power and expose the abject cruelties that are still as much a part of our daily lives as they were ages ago. In contrast with Harlow's narrow view of resistance literature, such texts are not concerned with fighting just one specific form of oppression, and they certainly are not interested in raising national awareness or helping to build new nations. Especially the issue of nation building, in what many see as a post-national era, is not relevant. The poems I have in mind are all deeply personal statements and none assumes any collective mantle. What they do, and that has always been a recognized quality of lyrical poetry, is create a personal Self that resounds with many others. And though they are not involved in any aspect of nation building, they often do let see a committed sense of national, collective identity, as well.

Let me refer to a well-known poem by Langston Hughes, "Negro":

Negro

I am a Negro:
Black as the night is black,
Black like the depths of my Africa.

I've been a slave:
Caesar told me to keep his door-steps clean.
I brushed the boots of Washington.

I've been a worker:
Under my hand the pyramids arose.
I made mortar for the Woolworth Building.

I've been a singer:
All the way from Africa to Georgia
I carried my sorrow songs.
I made ragtime.

I've been a victim:
The Belgians cut off my hands in the Congo.
They lynch me now in Texas.

> I am a Negro:
> Black as the night is black,
> Black like the depths of my Africa. (Hughes 1995: 24)

Although this poem anticipates the resistance literature Harlow had in mind, through its concerned with many of the issues that affected anti-colonialist writers, it also focuses on the oppression of slavery and its historical continuities across space and time, from ancient Egypt to modern day Texas. The next to final stanza where Hughes directly relates modern colonial violence in Africa, "The Belgians cut off my hands in the Congo", to then present racial violence in the USA, "They lynch me now in Texas", makes such linkages especially pertinent. As such it also illustrates well my contention that resistance literature is not to be confined to the anti-colonial or independence movements of the late sixties and early seventies. Furthermore, Hughes here, as in many other of his poems, also stresses not just the issue of racial oppression, but the exploitation of workers in general as he proudly claims a central role in the building of civilizations, reaching again across time and space to link the pyramids with the Woolworth Building. And inasmuch as it is a deeply personal poem, it is also very obviously a projection of the individual Self into a collectivity of the oppressed. The violence that Hughes denounces is not just a particular one: the Belgian Congo stands in for all modern colonialism, Rome for all imperial projects. But there can be no doubts that his poem, and its proud assertion of identity and of singing, are a form of resistance literature.

I would like to turn now to "The Death of the Shah", a poem by Frederick Seidel, included in his 2006 collection, *Ooga-Booga* (Seidel 2006). Seidel is one of the most important, if less studied, voices in American poetry and in many ways his poetry, focused so often on his experience of a life of privilege, and on expensive toys like hand-made Agusta racing bikes, might seem at first sight as far removed from the poetry of Hughes as possible. And yet, Seidel's poetry is as much a poetry of resistance in its incessant denouncing of the absurdities of civilization and the cruelties that characterize our modern age. His voice is mordantly ironic and brash, and perhaps this is what might seem more difficult to engage with. For even as Seidel does celebrate life and its various pleasures there is a constant dark stream of rage running through his work that might be bitter but never resigned. "The Death

of the Shah" is a long, complex, poem that at first might seem a strange choice, given the fact that he was deposed in 1979 and died in 1980. But the poem is titled "The Death of the Shah", and it is a sort of counter-elegy, focusing on violence and cruelty and on the need to resist it by denouncing it, while it also questions the possibility of doing so with any validity.

Running through the poem is the figure of a young woman sacrificed to the Shah's lust, which stands, metonymically, for the oppression of his regime:

> Any foal in the kingdom
> The Shah of Iran wanted
> He had brought to him in a military helicopter
> To the palace.
> This one was the daughter of one of his ministers, all legs, a goddess.
> She waited in a room.
> It was in the afternoon.
> …
> The Shah mounts the foal.
> It is an honor.
> He is in and out in a minute.
> She later became my friend
> And married a Texan.
> …
> I hurry to the gallery on the last day of the show
> To a line stretching around the block in the rain –
> For the Shah of sculptors, sculpture's virile king,
> And his cold-rolled steel heartless tons.
> The blunt magnificence stuns.
> Cruelty has a huge following.
> The cold-rolled steel mounts the foal. (Seidel 2006: 97-98)

Unlike Hughes's poem with its clear divide between oppressor and oppressed, Seidel shows the complicities between different groups and how difficult it is to disentangle them insofar as it is impossible to claim exemption for art or the artists themselves. This is so, right from the beginning, as the speaking I introduces himself under the Seidel typical guise of a dandiesque spoiled jet setter with a heavy dose of self-irony:

Here I am, not a practical man,
But clear-eyed in my contact lenses,
Following no doubt a slightly different line than the others,
Seeking sexual pleasure above all else,
Despairing of art and of life,
Seeking protection from death by seeking it
On a racebike, finding release and belief on two wheels. (Seidel 2006: 96)

Like Hughes, Seidel projects the speaking I into others; but, unlike Hughes, he does not, and cannot, put himself solely on the side of the oppressed. So he starts the poem declaring his goal of "Seeking sexual pleasure above all else" which already aligns him, to a certain extent, with the predatory Shah he will denounce. But, by the end of the poem it is with the girl that he sides, linking himself with her in a common plea for pity:

Have pity on a girl, perdurable, playful,
And delicate as a foal, dutiful, available,
Who is waiting on a bed in a room in the afternoon for God.
His Majesty is on his way, who long ago has died.
She is a victim in the kingdom, and is proud.
Have pity on me a thousand years from now when we meet.
Open the mummy case of this text respectfully.
You find no one inside. (Seidel 2006: 101)

This last gesture of emptying the subject of the poem, as well as the text itself, is strikingly different from Hughes' proud affirmation of ethnic identity and subjective identification with a mental Africa and yet it achieves very much the same purpose. For whereas in the beginning of the twentieth-century Hughes could still lay such a claim of depth at the same time that he already made it reserved by making it an inner depth: "Black like the depths of my Africa". Seidel, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, must confront the postmodern vacuity of such a claim for the subject and for art. His characterization of the text as a mummy case is both strongly ironic and acutely perceptive, as at the same time that Seidel uses art, the poem, to reflect on, denounce and expose cruelty and the abuses of power, he also takes a similarly critical view of his own art and refuses to give it any heroic or

mythical status. “The Death of the Shah” is by no means an isolated poem of Seidel’s. Also in *Ooga Booga*, “The Bush Administration” is arguably an even more direct attack on misguided politics and their resulting atrocities. The initial stanza, very much like Hughes’ poem establishes the historical continuities of imperial oppression:

> The darkness coming from the mouth
> Must be the entrance to a cave.
> The heart of darkness took another form
> And inside is the Congo in the man.
> I think the Bush Administration is as crazy as Sparta was.
> Sparta has swallowed the Congo and is famished. (Seidel 2006: 92)

But Seidel will not, and rightly so, make a separation between perpetrator and victim based on national lines. Bush and his administration are presented as much as oppressors as the Shah was, the citizens of New York who threw themselves from the burning towers are as much, if not, a victim of the cruelty of power as the young girl. Seidel reflects on the conundrum of enjoying life in the midst of generalized devastation by playing on the collusion between identity and suicide: “I feel a mania of happiness at being alive / As I write this suicide note. / I have never been so cheerfully suicidal, so sui-Seidel”. And he continues: “I am cheeriest / Crawling around on all fours eating gentle grass / And pretending I am eating broken glass” (Seidel 2006: 95). By the conclusion of the poem it is clear that he indicts his government’s policies of preventive strikes as causing a repeat of the 9/11 catastrophe:

> CENTCOM is drawing up war plans.
> They will drop snow on Congo.
> It will melt without leaving a trace, at great expense.
> America will pay any price to whiten darkness.
> My fellow citizen cicadas rise to the tops of the vanished Twin Towers
> And float back down white as ashes
> To introduce a new Ice Age.
> The countless generations rise from underground this afternoon
> And fall like rain.
> I never thought that I would live to see the towers fall again. (Seidel 2006: 95)

If there is a voice that has always been associated with protest and resistance in American poetry, it is that of Adrienne Rich. Her latest collection of poems is aptly titled *Tonight no Poetry Will Serve*, and it opens with a simple dictionary definition of the verb "to serve: to work for, to be a servant to; to give obedience and reverent honor to; to fight for; do military or naval service for" (Rich 2011: 7). The poem that lends its title to the collection is brief but presents a stark correlation between subjective voice, individual experience, the violence of war and the defiant claim that poetry will not serve, that parallels Seidel's conflations and reflections on the role of poetry:

> Saw you walking barefoot
> taking a long look
> at the new moon's eyelid
>
> Later spread
> sleep-fallen, naked in your dark hair
> asleep but not oblivious
> of the unslept unsleeping
> elsewhere
>
> Tonight I think
> no poetry
> will serve
>
> Syntax of rendition:
>
> verb pilots the plane
> adverb modifies action
>
> verb force-feeds noun
> submerges the subject
> noun is choking
> verb disgraced goes on doing
>
> now diagram the sentence. (Rich 2011: 25)

As with Seidel, there is a completely clear-eyed view that neither language nor poetry are immune to, or innocent of, cruelty. There is also no illusions as to the ability of poetry in the face of oppression, but there is a resolve to keep resisting: "verb disgraced goes on doing". Neither Seidel nor Rich are necessarily popular poets, in spite of the international acclaim Rich enjoys or the fine appreciation by some of the cultural elite that Seidel has received. But they clearly would not fit the recommendation of the UK's Art Council Report to concentrate more on rap, pop songs and greeting card verses so as to widen poetry's reception. Nor should they. But before any complaints of elitism get raised, I would like to propose a look at some of the important performances of poetry that do approach rap in their style, are clearly enjoyed by a broader, even if still select public, and deploy language's power to resist the blinding of sovereign power. Suheir Hammad's reading of her poem "What I Will" for instance, has all those qualities:

I will not
dance to your war
drum. I will
not lend my soul nor
my bones to your war
drum. I will
not dance to your
beating. I know that beat.
It is lifeless. I know
intimately that skin
you are hitting. It
was alive once
hunted stolen
stretched. I will
not dance to your drummed
up war. I will not pop
spin beak for you. I
will not hate for you or
even hate you. I will
not kill for you. Especially
I will not die

for you. I will not mourn
the dead with murder nor
suicide. I will not side
with you nor dance to bombs
because everyone else is
dancing. Everyone can be
wrong. Life is a right not
collateral or casual. I
will not forget where
I come from. I
will craft my own drum. Gather my beloved
near and our chanting
will be dancing. Our
humming will will be drumming. I
will not de played. I
will not lend my name
nor my rhythm to your
beat. I will dance
and resist and dance and
persist and dance. This heartbeat is louder than
death. Your war drum ain't
louder than this breath. (Hammad 2008)

Just as in the other poems already mentioned, there is a keen awareness of the role of poetry and a projection of the subject into the "skin" of the victims, at the same time that there is a clear defiance, Antigone-like, to accept the opinion of others in abeyance to state-decreed hate, and to resist: "I will not be played. (…) I will dance and resist…".

As a way of concluding these brief remarks, let me call attention to another poem by Adrienne Rich in that same collection, the "Ballade of the Poverties", dated from 2009. Many of the qualities of resistance evidenced by the other poems are here too clearly delineated, but I would like to call especial attention to the way in which this poem directly links oppression and violence with capitalism, and how this is repeatedly emphasized, as in a litany, by the varying refrain at the end of each stanza:

There's the poverty of the cockroach kingdom and the rusted toilet bowl
The poverty of to steal food for the first time
The poverty of to mouth a penis for a paycheck
…
There's poverty of theory poverty of swollen belly shamed
Poverty of the diploma or ballot that goes nowhere
Princes of predation let me tell you
There are poverties and there are poverties
…
The poverty of the pavement artist the poverty passed out on the pavement
Princes of finance you who have not lain there
There are poverties and there are poverties

There's the poverty of the child thumbing the Interstate
And the poverty of the bride enlisting for war
There is the poverty of stones fisted in the pocket
And the poverty of the village bulldozed to rubble
…
Princes of weaponry who have not ever tasted war
There are poverties and there are poverties

There's the poverty of wages wired for the funeral you
Can't get to the poverty of bodies lying unburied
…
Prince let me tell you who will never learn through words
There are poverties and there are poverties

You who travel by private jet like a housefly
Buzzing with the other flies of plundered poverties
Princes and courtiers who will never learn through words
Here's a mirror you can look into: take it: it's yours. (Rich 2011: 55-56)

Rich also assumes Antigone's role when she decries the poverty of the unburied bodies, symbol for the oppression of an evil sovereignty. And she is more than clear when she accuses those in power, princes of predation, princes of finance, princes of weaponry, of being incapable of learning through words, of understanding what poetry is trying to show

them, and offers them, in a final ironic mockery and ultimate resistance, their own mirror-image to look at.

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