

NOTES ON TONE

Three American Poets

THE ENIGMA OF courtly love poetry, according to the great mid-century medievalist Hugo Kuhn, is that its restraint transmits across centuries a sense of the existential terror and compensatory *joie de vivre* that must have characterized life in the Middle Ages. In their utterances of love, these formulaic, strangely contentless verses register what Kuhn called the ‘objective social reality’ of a poem.¹ Using metaphors derived from contemporary orders of hierarchy and subordination, medieval lyric not only sketches the feudal world but also documents its mood. We have no idea what it was like to be alive at that time, and yet, in this poetry, the atmosphere of the age appears to vibrate through.

The attempt to recover a felt sense of historical experience led Raymond Williams to invent the concept of a structure of feeling, which licenses a reading-backwards from ‘the arts of a period’ to its emotional ambience. ‘We can learn a great deal of the life of other places and times’, he wrote, ‘but certain elements . . . will always be irrecoverable’. Moreover,

Even those that can be recovered are recovered in abstraction, and this is of crucial importance. We learn each element as a precipitate, but in the living experience of the time every element was in a solution, an inseparable part of a complex whole. The most difficult thing to get hold of, in studying every past period, is this felt sense of the quality of life at a particular place and time: a sense of the ways in which the particular activities combined into a way of thinking and living.²

Williams called this sense, *inter alia*, a ‘colour’, a ‘style’, a ‘pattern’, a ‘characteristic’, a ‘culture’, a ‘particular living result of all the elements in

the general organization'.³ Another term for it might be *tone*, a word with a heightened significance for poetry due to its association with song. In music, tone signifies pitch or key. It derives from the Greek verb *teinein*, meaning 'to stretch'. In his prosimetrical treatise *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii*, the fifth-century African writer Martianus Capella wrote that 'a tone is a magnitude of space', or else 'an interval of a certain magnitude that is encompassed between two mutually different sounds'—a stretching between fixed points and a way of calibrating the distance between them.⁴ In this century, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht has proposed that we understand tone as the German *Stimmung*: mood, humour, temper, spirit, attitude, or tuning, as in the tuning of an instrument, a word closely related to *Stimme* or voice.⁵ Sianne Ngai, meanwhile, has articulated tone as 'a global and hyper-relational concept of feeling that encompasses attitude: a literary text's affective bearing, orientation, or "set toward" its audience and world.'⁶

This is an essay about tone, prompted by Kuhn's account of medieval lyric 'reserve' as an abstract but no less potent communication of social reality, and bolstered by Williams's foundational analysis of the relationship between the arts of a period and the general organization of society. It is also about poetry, but the poetry of this era as opposed to a distant one. In what follows, I provide an account of three American poets whose work exhibits a distinctive approach to treating 'composed and crafted poetic intonation' as, in Holly Pester's helpful phrase, 'the sound of the work of the historical present'.⁷ This is characterized by the use of flat, muted, withdrawn, inscrutable or otherwise recessive affects, which will, at first, seem at odds with the intensities of political commitment these poets also assert.

In her recent study of deadpan as a gesture that acquires special meaning in concert with racial blackness, Tina Post writes that deadpan depends on 'a degree of contextual discord—being impassive in circumstances

¹ Hugo Kuhn, *Dichtung und Welt im Mittelalter*, Stuttgart 1959, p. 22.

² Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution*, London 1975, p. 63.

³ Williams, p. 64.

⁴ Martianus Capella, *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii*, Padua 1987, sec. 960, 930.

⁵ Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: On a Hidden Potential of Literature*, Stanford 2012.

⁶ Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, Cambridge MA 2005, p. 43.

⁷ Holly Pester, 'The Politics of Delivery (Against Poet-Voice)', *The Poetry Review*, vol. 109, no. 2, Summer 2019.

that might call for expressiveness, or stating an absurdity with seeming seriousness'.⁸ The three poets I discuss write within that degree, widening it out such that the commonplace linkage of high-octane self-presentation to a sense of serious occasion or crisis comes undone. In doing so, they also challenge the pedestrian but no less potent conception of lyric poetry as an expressive genre that actively solicits empathy or (minimally) acknowledgement in exchange for intimate revelation. How might a poetics of withholding, impassivity or composure operate as a historical style, not least in a national context where the overflow of feeling is associated with what Lauren Berlant termed 'sentimental whiteness' and its longstanding centrality to the national project?⁹ This is not an essay written for or against any one kind of poetry; I don't mean to claim that flat poems are better than extravagant ones. I offer a provisional aetiology of flatness for the same reasons that Williams sought to understand the function of pastoral or the industrial novel: because these forms mediate the features of a history at once omnipresent and dislocated.

Underperformance

The old terms 'lyric subject' and 'lyric "I"' are customarily used to describe the projection of an individuated personality as the voice that says a poem. In the most basic conception, this 'I' is taken to be a first-person speaker whose thoughts and feelings provide the poem's subject and compel its motion. Some argue that this model dates back to Ancient Greece; others, that it is a Romantic invention. Regardless, it is uncontroversial that modernist poetry, with its preference for an aesthetics of fragmentation and collapse, offered an opportunity to break with such an 'I' and the assumptions it carried: that poetry can make private experience public and intelligible; that language is a shared resource; that personal identity is consistent over time; that an individual's viewpoint is unique and has value; that the perspective of one person can generally express human experience; that we can more or less say what we mean.

In an essay on poetry and race in Britain, Sandeep Parmar suggests that in the UK there exists a divide between avant-garde poetry—which is often if not always left or left-adjacent—and a 'conservative, mainstream'

⁸ Tina Post, *Deadpan: The Aesthetics of Black Inexpression*, New York 2023, p. 3.

⁹ Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*, Durham 2008, p. 65.

school of authors who behave as if modernism never happened and whose poems still trundle out ‘a self-assured universal “voice”’. By contrast, experimental poetry ‘relies on an unstable and purposeful decontextualizing of the lyric “I”’.¹⁰ One might add here that ‘lyric’ has lately become a shorthand not only for subjectivity but also for its amplification, and that this is especially true in poetry that is both formally innovative and resistant to the universalizing protocols Parmar describes. When we refer, for example, to lyric interludes in contemporary prose poems, we don’t just mean moments where the poetry starts to rhyme, succumbs to lineation, or falls into a clean meter. We mean moments when the language seems to weep or scream, to plead, cajole or charm, to confess—in short, to express an interior mental state and ask that its contents be deciphered and its sentiments recognized.

A good way to approach the identification of lyric utterance with emotional vividness is to consider something that Fredric Jameson says about modernism. For Jameson, modernism is not about the subject’s fissure, but about ‘dramatizing the unhappy paradox that when you constitute your individual subjectivity as a self-sufficient field and a closed realm, you thereby shut yourself off from everything else and condemn yourself to the mindless solitude of the monad, buried alive and condemned to a prison cell without egress.’¹¹ Any model of selfhood and psychology that depends on a strict separation between inside and outside, between interior states of mind and an exterior amphitheatre into which they are projected, casts doubt upon the possibility of successful communication. It suggests, in other words, a tragic view of social relations; the art Jameson describes—his key example is Munch’s *The Scream*—derives its emotional power from its sense of frustrated understanding and elusive solidarity.

By contrast, the three poets whose work I consider seem both to endorse and complicate Jameson’s famous pronouncement that postmodernism, unlike its hyper-emotive forebearer, involves a ‘waning of affect’, which may mean not just a ‘liberation from anxiety but a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well’.¹² They experiment with coolness and

¹⁰ Sandeep Parmar, ‘Not a British Subject: Race and Poetry in the UK’, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 6 December, 2015.

¹¹ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham NC 1989, p. 15.

¹² Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 15.

detachment as a critical response to capital, whose power is felt through encounters, direct and indirect, with state violence. Their poetics lends itself not just to a political reading but also to a theorization of underperformance *per se*.

Cooler styles

This flatness is at some remove from two more familiar kinds. In psychiatry, the descriptors 'flat' or 'blunted' affect are diagnostic criteria for schizophrenia, severe depression and post-traumatic stress disorder; they are also associated with adverse reactions to anti-psychotic or mood-stabilizing drugs. In these contexts flatness has an irreducibly negative connotation. It suggests a departure from normative emotional states that are flexible and dynamic and so indicate an ease of relay between oneself and the world. To be flat, in this sense, is to be in a state of social and emotional deprivation, in which one cannot experience a wide range of feelings, communicate them to others, or meet life with empathy, irritation, kindness, curiosity, desire or any other set of fine-grained, non-catastrophic responses.

Then there is the kind of aristocratic flatness that flaunts the subject's emotional immunity. Its modern incarnation probably dates back to the sixteenth-century archetype of the *honnête homme*, the man of taste who adopts a pose of affable irony with respect to the foibles of his fellow man and who, as Pascal says, is neither a poet nor a scientist but a judge of both.¹³ Shonni Enelow, writing of the evolution in theatrical styles over the course of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, suggests that this mode lives on in the performances of Greta Garbo, Steve McQueen and Charlotte Rampling, actors who similarly convey 'that they are above or outside emotion, either aristocratically detached or winningly unflappable', and whose inscrutability is anchored either in the privileges of class (Garbo, Rampling) or masculinity (McQueen).¹⁴

For Enelow, these 'cooler styles' are all but entirely detached from 'the thread of resistance to and evasion of spectacular emotionality among

¹³ '*Les gens universels ne sont appelés ni poètes, ni géomètres, etc.; mais ils sont tout cela, et juges de tous ceux-là*': Blaise Pascal, *Selected 'Pensées' and Provincial Letters/Pensées Et Provinciales Choisies*, ed. Stanley Applebaum, New York 2014.

¹⁴ Shonni Enelow, 'The Great Recession: American Movie Acting Today', *Film Comment*, September–October 2016.

many in today's new generation of stars', whose flatness 'doesn't evoke emotional detachment or indifference but rather a tortured mistrust of expression itself'.¹⁵ This is closer to the flatness that I identify in contemporary American poetry, in whose 'ambivalence about the trustworthiness of emotional expression' we also find a denial of that affective iconography in which 'everyday repression gives way, in typically predictable patterns, to outpourings of powerful feeling'. What Enelow terms acting's Great Recession denies the logic of subtext and refuses the moral prestige of self-revelation: a negation that might be extended to a tenacious conception of lyric poetry predicated on a hydraulic model of selfhood for which authenticity lies within, to be squeezed out by salubrious technique.

That these performance styles have emerged at a time of protracted crisis hardly needs to be emphasized. 'In American public discourse', Enelow writes, 'today's crises are by definition continual', requiring 'constant vigilance' and 'unspectacular strategies of survival'. This echoes an explanation Berlant gives for flatness in an essay on the film *Mysterious Skin* (2004), which is set in the 1980s and bears witness to the disintegration of the welfare state and devastation of the economy. Here, writes Berlant, the film's promotion of underperformance as a style of reaction to traumatic events (in this case, childhood sexual abuse) 'sneaks around the codes of sincerity and intelligibility that make possible normative social trust and trust in the social', in a way that seems 'to engender clues about how to live without the postwar fantasy of upwardly mobile good life optimism'.¹⁶

The flatness I have in mind is also a form of rejoinder to a calamitous present. It, too, short-circuits the expectation that subjects will authenticate themselves through confession or breakdown, that they will call forth hidden but unfeigned intensities of feeling through their own meticulous artistry. Crucially, although a far cry from the *honnêteté* lofted by the crosscurrents of courtly and early commercial society, it retains what Pascal identified as an intimacy with judgement. Materializing in scenes and histories of violence, it ultimately sidesteps or leapfrogs an understanding of such contexts as traumatic, to land on the simple verdict that

¹⁵ Enelow's key examples are the performances in the *Hunger Games* franchise, *Carol* and *Fruitvale Station*.

¹⁶ Berlant, 'Structures of Unfeeling: *Mysterious Skin*', *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 28.3, September 2015, p. 192.

they are wrong. Without saying that this is a more radical approach to a political poetics, I would nonetheless suggest that it is a crucial and overlooked style of critique. In the US in particular, such flatness confronts a public culture that has long appealed to unexamined and unmanaged feeling to supercharge repressive programmes and paranoias.

A question Pester poses—‘can intonated delivery be heard as a comment and critique of institutions that produce and oppress speaking subjects?’—is therefore answered in the affirmative.¹⁷ The history of mainstream American affect is inseparable from its conscription into the surveillance and control of the body politic. It is also inseparable from a literary culture that, as James Baldwin pointed out nearly seventy years ago, imagines that the ostentatious parading of excessive emotion is both a necessary and sufficient means of registering opposition to the status quo. The poets I examine share Baldwin’s suspicion that conventional iconographies of expression are often ‘a catalogue of violence’, selectively licensing disinhibition for some subjects while policing the self-articulations of others.¹⁸

Us/US

The notion that the sonnet is an incarcerating structure is a venerable one; only think of Wordsworth’s narrow room and cells. It has also, at times, been more than a metaphor. Giovanni Antonio Petrucci, Fray Luis de León, Tommaso Campanella, Charlotte Smith, John Thelwall, Jean Cassou and T. E. Nicholas all wrote sonnets in actual prisons, where ‘the damp foul floor, the ragged wall / And shattered window, grated high’ roughen the merely figurative postures of the *prison amoureuse*.¹⁹ In his 2017 ‘American Sonnet for My Past and Future Assassin’, Terrance Hayes folds this lineage into a national history of segregation and confinement, rendering a poetic form ‘that is part prison, / Part panic closet,’ ‘part music-box, part meat / Grinder’. Playing on a solemn pun that draws poetry’s song birds—Shelley’s skylark, Bishop’s sandpiper—into a sinister confluence with the ‘crow’ of Jim Crow (‘I make you both gym & crow here’, ‘As the crow / you undergo a beautiful catharsis

¹⁷ Pester, ‘Against Poet-Voice’.

¹⁸ James Baldwin, ‘Everybody’s Protest Novel’ in *Notes of a Native Son*, Boston 1955, p. 14.

¹⁹ John Thelwall, ‘The Cell’ in *Poems Written in Close Confinement in the Tower and Newgate under a Charge of High Treason*, London 1795, lines 5–6.

trapped one night in the shadows of the gym', etc.), Hayes proposes that the sonnet, and perhaps poetry itself, is 'a box of darkness with a bird at its heart', a cultural practice that, in Jameson's memorable phrase, is the internal expression of American world military and economic domination, whose underside is 'blood, torture, death and terror'.²⁰

Hayes's poem is a malediction, spurred on by a desire to avenge and transcend. Its affect is hot, the sonnet form 'a little room in a house set aflame'.²¹ As for the voice, it is embedded in an incantatory first person that apostrophizes a diabolical 'you', the past and future assassin who might be a cop, or the canon, and is probably both. Contrast this gathering storm with the thirtieth and last poem in Wendy Trevino's sonnet sequence *Popular Culture and Cruel Work*, published in the 2019 collection *Cruel Fiction*:

The largest prison strike in the history
Of the us is still going. "We want
[You] to understand the economics
Of the prison system . . . It's not about
Crime & punishment. It's about money,"
Inmate & organizer Melvin Brooks-
Ray says. Whoever we are we're also
Against the state, prisons & cops. Against
The enforcement of gender. Confinement.
We know the war has to be total. It's
Just like that. We're against borders & choose
Who we want around us. I think it will
Get harder. We can't forget Diana
La Vengadora. It might come to that.²²

Anyone familiar with Diane di Prima's *Revolutionary Letters* will immediately recognize the patient but still slightly irritable didacticism of Trevino's opening lines, which, as in many of di Prima's poems, begin by delivering a parcel of information to a reader who is conscripted into the position of student. 'Revolutionary Letter #3' begins with the directive 'store water; make a point of filling your bathtub / at the first news

²⁰ Terrance Hayes, 'American Sonnet for My Past and Future Assassin', in *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin*, New York 2018, lines 1–2, 7–9, 12; Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 5.

²¹ Hayes, 'American Sonnet', line 2.

²² Wendy Trevino, Sonnet 30, in *Cruel Fiction*, Oakland 2018, p. 72. All of Trevino's poems quoted here appear in *Cruel Fiction* and are cited by title and page number.

of trouble', while 'Revolutionary Letter #13' opens 'now let me tell you / what is a Brahmasastra'.²³ But di Prima's poems tend to build in intensity, often by shifting from political to metaphysical stakes ('one flesh, breathing joy as the stars / breathe destiny down on us') and unleashing the urgency of the imperative mood: 'remember', she says, 'know', 'avoid', 'go', 'let', 'put back', 'don't'. Trevino's, by contrast, resist escalation both in their rhetoric and in their prosody, which is so skilfully submerged beneath the ordinariness of her language—with its preponderance of pronouns and commonplace verbs and almost complete expulsion of the figurative—that you could read a poem like this one several times before recognizing that it is written in nearly perfect iambic pentameter; for example, if you drop a syllable from 'history' and pronounce it 'hist'ry', as most American English speakers would do in a conversational setting.

If di Prima is interested in expanding the possibilities of apostrophe by inventing a 'you' who is not simply general but collective, and a 'we' that explodes the parameters of the couple, Trevino seems to want to press on the limits of poetic address until it very nearly dissolves. It is not until the poem's twelfth line that the word 'I' appears, and before that every pronominal instance is noticeably disfigured or estranged, beginning with the stumbling block presented by 'us' in the second line. Trevino's 'us' indicates the abbreviation for 'United States', which would normally be capitalized. Trevino thus forces the reader to turn the object pronoun 'us' into 'US', at once magnifying the first-person plural so that its borders are flush with those of the nation and cutting the nation down to the size of its inhabitants, or detainees. Meanwhile 'we' first appears inside quoted speech, '[You]' inside brackets, emptying-out the form of authenticity so that it may be re-filled by the collective and still-emergent subject 'Whoever we are', an anonymity heroicized through its association with La Vengadora, the unidentified vigilante who claimed to have killed two bus drivers in retaliation for the femicides of Juarez.

Pressing the limits

The name 'La Vengadora', or The Avenger, is the poem's lone repository of a strong recognizable sentiment, obscured through its nominalization even as it is given a folkloric power. Otherwise, Trevino's sonnet is

²³ Diane di Prima, 'Revolutionary Letter #3' and 'Revolutionary Letter #13', in *Revolutionary Letters*, San Francisco 1971, lines 1–2.

devoid of strictly affective language. It turns commitment into a matter of position—the state of being against borders, opposed to but also pressed or penned against them—rather than effusion; of the body's location in a space it shares with others. This is truer still of 'From Santa Rita 128–131', which describes Trevino's 54-hour incarceration following an Occupy Oakland protest (Santa Rita is a jail in Dublin, California, roughly forty miles east of San Francisco). 'Santa Rita' is a prose poem in list form—a list, as the subtitle indicates, 'OF THINGS REMEMBERED AS I REMEMBERED THEM & IN NO WAY TO BE TAKEN AS A COMPLETE ACCOUNT OF WHAT HAPPENED THERE THEN OR WHAT IS HAPPENING THERE NOW'—and it is even more rigorously flat, refusing at every turn to infer or extract affect from gesture:

I was detained approximately 54 hours, 47 of which I spent in jail.

I spent 47 hours under bright fluorescent lights.

I was cold approximately 43 hours.
I was moved 7 times, to 5 different 'tanks.'

I spent no more than 15 hours in a tank near a door with a small rectangle of glass through which 21 women & then 27 women could see barbed wire & light then dark outside.

I was fed 6 times—5 'sack lunches' which included 2 slices of stale bread, 2 slices of slimy bologna, 2 crème cookies soaked in bologna juice, 1 packet of 'salad dressing' (mayo), 1 packet of mustard, 1 packet of a 'calcium mix' & 1 orange; & 1 'hot meal,' which included maybe turkey & definitely beans, a side of cooked carrots, some sauce, a salad, a cube of cornbread & a cube of cake.

I used a toilet no more than 5 times. I slept no more than 4 hours.²⁴

Trevino proceeds via a logic of free association—"THINGS REMEMBERED AS I REMEMBERED THEM"—that brutally ironizes the poem's setting, in which the reduction of life to enumerated actions and abuses drives home the meaning of the phrase 'doing time'. Once again, the voice that speaks the poem emerges as a negation or (to use Enelow's word) a recession from the emotional genres we would expect to be activated by the context: there is no lament, no complaint. Desire is cooled by the slang of 'crushed on', fear articulates itself as a 'worry' over parking

²⁴ Trevino, 'From Santa Rita 128–131', p. 13.

tickets or not getting into a college class. And yet, this is a poem about state terror, and it's impossible to read about the 'drops of fresh blood' and the 'spots of dried blood' Trevino sees on the jail's floor and walls, or about women being put in solitary confinement, without recognizing that all these inmates are under the threat of police murder.²⁵

In 'Santa Rita', flatness mocks the melodrama of the state, with its cops who say things like 'This isn't about the constitution . . . If I don't like your face . . .' as they revel in the self-inflations of arbitrary power.²⁶ These 'pigs' threaten and mock their prisoners and repeatedly express concern for 'the system'—in this case, the computer program that processes the inmates—while also demanding sympathy by insisting that they, too, are 'part of the 99%'. They are not so much indicted as ignored by the poem's rasp of dry wit, audible, for instance, in the description of a woman 'with an "Abortions Get Babies to Heaven Faster" fanny pack she likes to wear when she visits Texas'; if 'Dante's *Inferno* came up i time', so does the exuberant rap-pop hit 'Gucci Gucci' and the lyric 'One big room / full of bad bitches'.²⁷ Tone, as I. A. Richards wrote, refers to an 'attitude' to a listener,²⁸ and these moments of rebarbative humour further insulate Trevino from any demand that she make herself congenial, that she win readers over by defending the motives and tactics of Occupy or explaining the barbarity of capitalism. Like her sonnet, this poem deliberately undersells its agonies, holding back the sentimental currency of confession in the very place where confession is likely to be extracted under duress.

There is a formal as well as a thematic similarity between Trevino's 'Santa Rita'—a poem of 'things remembered'—and Ted Berrigan's 1980 poem 'Memories Are Made of This', which lays out a series of hackneyed phrases, many of them drawn from popular music, as if to mourn the disappearance of their easy sentiment at the dawn of the neoliberal era: 'I'm not blue, I'm just feeling a little bit lonesome for some / love again, isn't used much in poetry these days', 'I will gather stars, out of the blue, for you, isn't used much in poetry these days'.²⁹ Berrigan's poem also has a characteristic punctum, namely that, in its second line, it identifies one

²⁵ Trevino, 'From Santa Rita 128–131', p. 17.

²⁶ Trevino, 'From Santa Rita 128–131', p. 16.

²⁷ Trevino, 'From Santa Rita 128–131', p. 14, 16–17.

²⁸ I. A. Richards, *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgment*, London 1929, p. 176.

²⁹ Ted Berrigan, 'Memories Are Made of This' in *The Selected Poems of Ted Berrigan*, ed. Alice Notley, Anselm Berrigan and Edmund Berrigan, Berkeley 2011, p. 173.

of poetry's nearly-lost relics as the word 'Comrade', which, like 'Mistress', 'isn't used much in poetry these days'. This troubles the expectation that cliché is merely to be dispensed with and suggests a certain unlikely overlap between the earnestness of pop sentiment, the expressive potency and sweetness of lyric, and the thrum of solidarity. Likewise, 'one big room / full of bad bitches' is the only line in 'Santa Rita' with metrical stress, and Trevino implicitly poeticizes it by using the forward slash, as though it were two lines of verse.

Alternate syntax

Cruel Fiction was published by Commune Editions, a joint venture of Bay Area poets including Juliana Spahr. It's to Spahr that I turn next, for there is probably no contemporary poet with a more acrobatic capacity to shift between sentimental and obscure registers of feeling. 'It's All Good, It's All Fucked' from 2015 is, like 'Santa Rita', an Occupy poem. Its title already suggests an emotional averaging in the oscillation from one extreme to another, from utopian achievement to obscene totality. This point of equilibrium might represent a political stasis or impasse or, at worst, defeat; alternatively, it might simply be part of the rhythm of a kind of resistance that snubs what Ariella Azoulay has described as a normative 'syntax' of revolution, inherited (or left over) from the French example of 1789.

That syntax, Azoulay explains, 'reduces the language of revolution to a series of local events with discrete beginnings and endings as well as specific causes and effects, after which order—sovereign order, of course—is restored'. Its alternative is a disordered rhetoric of actions that are not clearly 'goal-oriented' but arise spontaneously, when people who may not have pre-existing political affiliations nonetheless find themselves out on the street, improvising however briefly 'a shared world' composed of 'dissentient ways of living'.³⁰ Spahr's poem, like many in her 2015 collection *That Winter the Wolf Came*, borrows this rhetoric for its poetics, and through a series of formal experiments asks how works of art might learn to keep time with this protracted, diffuse, sometimes rudderless idea of a movement.

If that were all Spahr did—if her poems were loose, expansive and prose-like just in imitation of Occupy's loose, expansive and quotidian

³⁰ Ariella Azoulay, 'Living a Revolution', *The Brooklyn Rail*, 2012.

variation on the political uprising—her work would be easier merely to enjoy. However, Spahr’s poetry is difficult, and it gathers difficulty to itself by aggressively undermining the shared sacred protocol of lyric poetry and heterosexual society: monogamy. The conceit of this poem is that its speaker is in an unsatisfying relationship with a figure called ‘Non-Revolution’. Non-Revolution is an object of desire—‘something about Non-Revolution’s smell and body had gotten into me . . . I could not get enough of it’—and repulsion (‘it tasted slightly sour, off’), intimacy (‘Tongue and hands on clit or cock’) and conflict (‘Fist fights too. Miscommunication. Constant emergencies’). It is clear from the jump that Non-Revolution is not really a person and that its nature and magnitude as a figure is uncertain. Still, its edges are tugged, again and again, to fit the frame of love, so that every moment of frustrated longing is trivialized but also exacerbated by the reader’s appetite for conventionality. We want a happy ending, but

Non-Revolution was an uneven lover. At moments there. At other moments not. Often Non-Revolution was off with others. Tongue somewhere else in the corner of some other plaza somewhere. This hurt me and it didn’t hurt me. I was jealous. I’ll admit it. I wanted all of the possibility of revolution all the fucking time. I was willing to take it modified and negated even . . . I wanted to be there all the time, to be inside every moment, to always be on the lips of Non-Revolution and whomever Non-Revolution was touching with their tongue, whatever parts of bodies of Mexico City, Santiago, El Alto, Madrid, Cairo, Suez, Istanbul, Yenagoa. I wanted to be everywhere that Non-Revolution was. I wanted to be with Non-Revolution and everyone Non-Revolution was with.³¹

Even as this passage builds in intensity and ardour, its passions are tempered by abstraction—the substitution of cities for rivals—and Spahr’s toggling between sentiment and satire, between amorous desperation and the deflationary reminder that love’s language is always, as she says in the poem’s very next line, ‘so classic, so clichéd’. So, too, is the language of poetry: ‘If I was a poet of many centuries previous, I’d call [hatred of capitalism] the sweetest wine of the beloved.’³²

How does a line like that land? Like Berrigan’s ‘I will gather stars, out of the blue, for you’, it ironizes its own elegy to misplaced or forfeited enormities of feeling while extracting just a filament of poetic substance as if from their very core. Moments like these, where an almost unbearably

³¹ Juliana Spahr, *That Winter the Wolf Came*, Oakland 2015, pp. 68–9.

³² Spahr, *That Winter*, pp. 69, 71.

fierce tenderness for both people and poetry shifts into the poem's register of spare, even monotonous narration, are inevitably followed by jokes—'During these weeks, these months, Non-Revolution was a particularly cloudy and confused meme'—or by the inane narration of a bad romance: 'long after it was clear it was over we kept texting. Kept emailing. I continued looking through the feeds of friends of friends for Non-Revolution, clicking like when I found them.' Similarly, the brief moments of collective rapture that structure the poem's progress, such as a crowd of protestors dancing to Michael Jackson's 'Smooth Criminal' or 'running like gazelles' from the police, always contract into incongruous descriptions of manageable disappointment or daily life under capital.³³

It is with one such moment that the poem ends, as the speaker decides to 'go home to read . . . I put on my earphones and click on the app that imitates the radio.' This may give the impression that the poem is essentially depressive and resigned, but in its last line the speaker appears 'determined, head down', a description that encourages us to recover something more bracing and purposive from this 'absurdly specific and muddled story.'³⁴ The poem, I think, means to educate us in what, following Azoulay, we might call the emotional syntax of modern revolution, proposing that *ex tempore*, often leaderless movements, occupations, blockages, protests and skirmishes have either succeeded the French Revolution's model or revealed themselves to be the true engine of historical transformation. It means to train us in the discomfiting affect of emergence, the feeling of being in the midst of or, as Spahr says, 'with' a collectivity that is still taking shape, whose intentions are unsettled, and which may not respond to traditional patterns of harmony and cohesion, just as Non-Revolution, in its guise as a wayward lover, does not respond to the speaker's desire for constant proximity and attention.

Dislocations

For Jameson, as for Berlant, there is something unactionable about flatness and its dispassionate cohort. The waning of affect evacuates and thus enervates the subject, or throws him into 'a strange, compensatory, decorative exhilaration', fleeing from one extreme of experience to another. Or else, in Berlant's more sympathetic sense, it becomes 'a resource' for

³³ Spahr, *That Winter*, p. 69–70.

³⁴ Spahr, *That Winter*, p. 79, 74.

'whoever can show up to withdraw into whatever "whatever" style works to maintain relationality *in some way*', while never settling into those recognizable forms of social life that might secure intimacy or solidarity.³⁵ These are good accounts of what flatness does in the mainstream, or for works of art that do not present themselves as overtly political, whether it's Warhol's multiples or a Hollywood movie like *Mysterious Skin*. But flatness has different potentials in different genres. As Post says of deadpan, 'it might enact deference or denial, quietude or aggression, resistance, or acquiescence': to put it bluntly, it depends.³⁶

In the hands of Spahr and Trevino, flatness becomes an essentially differential style that cordons off the critical, often insurgent voice from lyric conventions of expressivity and relation, from the drama of the subject who grows larger and larger in situations of conflict or stress. Flatness in this discriminating capacity is basically scientific, which is to say that it sorts things into the categories to which they belong, erecting a clear boundary between 'us' and 'them'. This boundary is about politics—Spahr derides the cosseted intellectuals who 'refused to throw down with Non-Revolution' because 'Bifo told them it was ok not to'—but it is a politics the poem gauges tonally.³⁷ The work of poetry, here, is to make dissent and defiance manifest as a relational style, not just as a matter of opinion. In Summer Kim Lee's phrase, that style is 'against relatability, but for relation', strictly hostile to any demand to be 'legible and transparent' as a committed, suffering, angry, aggrieved, mournful or wronged person but ardently open to the social as a zone of collective transformation.³⁸

This flatness could be considered as a twenty-first century inheritor of Adornian negativity, for it too represents an 'emancipation' of 'dissonance from its various resolutions', where 'resolution' means the reinforcement of society's demand to be accommodated, indeed, to be tolerated.³⁹ However, what makes this flatness distinctive is that it is most persuasively deployed by minoritarian poets who have historically been disqualified from the purview of lyric expressivity: because they

³⁵ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 10; Berlant, 'Structures of Unfeeling', p. 211.

³⁶ Post, *Deadpan*, p. 19.

³⁷ Spahr, *That Winter*, p. 77.

³⁸ Summer Kim Lee, 'Staying In: Mitski, Ocean Vuong, and Asian American Asociality', *Social Text*, vol. 37, no. 1 (138), March 2019, pp. 27–50.

³⁹ Theodor Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, London and New York 2005, p. 56.

are women, because they are not white, because they are poor, and so on. There is indeed such a thing as a ‘whiteness of deadpan, deadvoice, deadeye’ in passive-aggressive performances that point ‘to the power of dramatized withholding’—its epitome might be Melville’s death-driven *Bartleby*—but that mode tends to be much more inward, less moved by the promise of solidarity with like-minded others and driven by a hardly disguised desire to grasp at power, intimidate, be exceptional and even (like *Bartleby*) produce terror.⁴⁰

The anti-theatrical poetics of Spahr and Trevino, by contrast, drive a sharp wedge between literature and any compulsory (or compulsive) sociality, without suggesting that the aesthetic has an innate liberatory potential. It’s possible that Tongo Eisen-Martin—a poet based, like Trevino and Spahr, in the Bay Area and reacting directly to its racial, economic, and spatial conditions—takes a more auspicious view. ‘Art’, as he put it in an interview with *Spike* magazine, ‘is just the activities of your body and your mind outside of shorthand social convention’. ‘If I don’t have to talk to you in order to socially reproduce myself and I can just talk’, he continues, ‘poetry is going to come out’.⁴¹ I’m reminded of Mayakovsky’s crack that a great deal of poetry ‘is an incitement to get girls to walk with poets’—sexuality being, of course, a very basic form of social self-reproduction—because one of the most notable features of Eisen-Martin’s dissonant poetics is its ability to pull its energies away from the banal labour of seduction, whether that means erotic overtures or, more pointedly, convincing himself or others to be reconciled to unbearable forms of life.⁴² His poetry, which is very beautiful, is also militantly disengaged from the pressure to make itself appealing. It is not so much flat as fugitive, restless and mercurial, summoning only to slide out of a lyric idiom of self-understanding and self-presentation.

This poetry is difficult partly because it does not seem as though it should be. On the page, Eisen-Martin’s lines are instantly recognizable as late-modernist free verse: their shape doesn’t take you by surprise, like Trevino’s sonnets or Spahr’s long blocks of prose. However, their tone is wildly discombobulating, a dense screen of idiomatic phrases and rhythms crossed with utterly inscrutable emotional ‘scenes’, to use

⁴⁰ Berlant, ‘Structures of Unfeeling’, p. 197.

⁴¹ Tongo Eisen-Martin, current San Francisco poet laureate, interviewed by David Brazil, ‘Art Keeps a Revolution Honest’, *Spike*, 23 September 2022.

⁴² Vladimir Mayakovsky, *How to Make Verse*, trans. V. Coe, Willimantic 1985, p. 28.

Eisen-Martin's word: 'I promise that I have a real live girlfriend / We are going to drive to Mexico tomorrow / I will be riding in the trunk'.⁴³

Passages like these are deadpan in Post's sense, which is to say they refuse to serve up strong emotion where it might be most expected. But generally speaking, Eisen-Martin's tone, like his poetic line, is not really deadpan but splintered and unresolved:

A tour guide through your robbery
He also is

Cigarette saying 'look what I did about your silence.'

Ransom water and box spring gold
—This decade is only for accent grooming, I guess.⁴⁴

With its inverted syntax ('A tour guide . . . he also is') and its hypnagogic epithets (ransom water, box spring gold), these first few lines of the poem 'Faceless' instantly dislocate language from routine, so that when the first-person arrives in the unconfident admission of 'I guess' it seems no more authoritative than the cigarette who speaks in line 3. As for 'I guess', it encases the preceding utterance as well as the poem that follows in a scrim of depressive apathy: this poem, we understand, will be loose, hypothetical, without urgency or conviction. The posture is repeated a few lines later—'War games, I guess'—before Eisen-Martin obliterates it with an unexpected swerve into confrontation and condemnation:

The start of mass destruction
Begins and ends
In restaurant bathrooms
That some people use
And other people clean

'you telling me there's a rag in the sky?'
—waiting for you. yes—⁴⁵

Right down to its em-dashes, this parting shot recalls Baudelaire's famous address to his *hypocrite lecteur*: '— *mon semblable*, — *mon frère!*'

⁴³ Eisen-Martin, 'Scenes Do Not Flee' in *Heaven Is All Goodbyes*, San Francisco 2017, p. 89. All poems quoted here are from this collection.

⁴⁴ Eisen-Martin, 'Faceless', p. 9.

⁴⁵ Eisen-Martin, 'Faceless', p. 9.

Unlike 'Au Lecteur', however, 'Faceless' does not end here, though even if it did it would have already abandoned the climactic thrust of Baudelaire's line, along with its convulsive punctuation and the menacing, slightly hammy 'gotcha' it hurls at the reader who, like the poet, is said to be well-acquainted with 'that fastidious monster', *Ennui*.⁴⁶

Ennui, for Baudelaire, is a sensation of bloated self-disgust. It is the affective accompaniment of a life that limps along the *demi-monde's* perimeter, enlarging itself with booze and drugs and sex. The word itself comes from the Latin *in odio*, or 'in hatred', and much of *Fleurs du Mal* is taken up with discovering how the stupor of sensuality might be transfigured, by poetry, into a baroque revulsion: for one's self, one's lovers, one's audience, for modernity as figured by its great invention, the city. Eisen-Martin has San Francisco instead of Paris on which to draw the map of his own odium—the city is a 'dream' that 'requires more condemned Africans' and boasts 'the worst downtown yet'—but his *ennui* never blooms into florid clusters of images like '*un débauché pauvre qui baise et mange / Le sein martyrisé d'une antique catin*'.⁴⁷ It is contemptuous and cool, occasionally intensifying into axioms—like the one about menial labour and mass destruction—that hit hard precisely because they are delivered with so little bluster.

This is not, of course, to knock Baudelaire. Still, times change. *Épater les bourgeois* is not the mission in 'this / police state candy dispenser that / you all call a neighborhood'.⁴⁸ Consider some of Eisen-Martin's most frequently cited lines: 'My dear, if it is not a city, it is a prison. / If it has a prison, it is a prison. Not a city.'⁴⁹ 'My dear' is an endearment whose actual purpose is to estrange the speaker from his addressee. Like the 'you' in 'waiting for you. yes—' it exposes the hollowness of intimate language used against a backdrop of brutality. The city with a prison is not a city but a prison, and tenderness under the aegis of state violence is not tenderness but a dispassionate tic, a sign evacuated of all but the slightest trace of its social meaning. This poetry shocks, though not by aggressivity or flamboyance. It shocks by its starkness, its insistence on using the rhetoric of affection while withholding its pleasures, most obviously the pleasure of reciprocity between the poet and his *lecteur*.

⁴⁶ Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, tr. William Aggeler, New York 2015, p. 6.

⁴⁷ Eisen-Martin, 'The Course of Meal', p. 13.

⁴⁸ Eisen-Martin, 'The Course of Meal', p. 15.

⁴⁹ Eisen-Martin, 'Faceless', p. 10.

As for Eisen-Martin's reader, he belongs to a very particular group: 'We should have fit in. Warehouse jobs are for communists. But now more corridor and hallway have walked into our lives. Now the whistling is less playful and the barbed wire is overcrowded too.' In this surrealist explanation of *établissement* we are hailed as communists, which here means people at a tragic distance from the working class. The passage is darkly funny and profoundly sad; it represents what I take to be the motivating dialectic of Eisen-Martin's tone. Flatness is the exemplary affect of a white-collar abyss of corridors and hallways. It belongs to the gentrifying city which, doing globalization on a smaller scale, 'killed the world for the sake of giving everyone the same backstory.'⁵⁰ Poetry—at least, this poetry—transforms it into a critical style without disguising its origin in a funereal everyday, and it does so by being completely explicit about the violence that stabilizes and anaesthetizes life in the city.

A recessive poetics doesn't have to be radical: it might be timid, callous or boring. As Eisen-Martin's work suggests, because flatness is embedded in a sense of the present as not only cruel but monotonous, it has definitively seceded from more exuberant or animated forms of expression; if it didn't, it would not be flatness but melancholy. One might accuse it, then, as one might accuse these poets, of refusing or being unable to present a model of social life that is ecstatic, and through which human life might finally uncover the full range of its capacities for experience. But flatness is also, or might be, an ethical withdrawal from the impulse to dictate how any other person should encounter themselves. There is no cult of flatness, though there has long been a cult of lyric agitation; and since the latter is in no danger of dissolving, perhaps it might be good to have some alternatives to it.

⁵⁰ Eisen-Martin, 'Faceless', p. 10.